RUSTLERS' VALLEY

CLARENCE E. MULFORD

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RUSTLERS' VALLEY

BOOKS BY
CLARENCE E. MULFORD

BLACK BUTTES

BUCK PETERS, RANCHMAN

HOPALONG CASSIDY

JOHNNY NELSON

TEX EWALT

THE COMING OF CASSIDY—
AND THE OTHERS

THE MAN FROM BAR-20

RUSTLERS' VALLEY

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

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"Black Buttes," "The Man from Bar-20," "Buck Peters, Ranchman," "Hopalong Cassidy," "Johnny Nelson," etc.

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CHAPTER I

THE CHOICE

THE sharp splat of the bullet and the downward glide of a ribbon of dry sand checked the forward surge of the bay mare and she arose on her trim hind hoofs, hung perilously in the balance while one might count five, and then, whirling like a dancer, dropped down facing the way she had come and leaped ahead like a missile from a catapult. Hollister stuck to her back like a burr, bending low in the rocking-chair saddle to escape the out-flung branches which threatened even as they protected him. Over his head the sudden scream of a bullet as suddenly turned to a cracking hammer stroke and bits of dead bark sifted down as the dry branch broke with a snap. To face the open stretch of the pass against the rifles guarding it was death or capture, in this case synonymous; to follow the back trail was as bad. To his left, brushing his knees, reared the sheer wall of the mountain; to his right, a scant yard away, the precipice dropped straight down to the floor of the canyon, where first-growth pines looked like a tangled mat of seedlings.

When he had turned on this trail at the base of the

mountain he had been less than an hour ahead of the posse, which for two days he had paced and tricked with the skill of a hunted fox. Now he was done. In those two days, turned back from every exit leading from the long, narrow valley, escaping by hair-breadth margins half a score of times and doubling and twisting on his trail, twice breaking through their following cordon like a thunderbolt, he had given them the time they had needed to get a guard on Blackrock Pass. He knew the pass too well to attempt its forcing. For half a mile the narrow trail zigzagged up the wall of the chasm within fair rifle shot of the pass mouth.

The bay thundered on, sure-footed as a mountain sheep, amazing Hollister by the power of her bunching muscles. The strain of the last two days seemed to fall from her like the slipping of a robe. He touched her proud neck affectionately and shook his head as a flat, whip-like report cracked up from the valley. Suddenly he stiffened. His expression swiftly ran the changes from sullen dejection through the eager glow of hope to the set grimness of a desperate resolve. To be caught was sure death, with a period of humiliation preceding it; to take the only way that remained was almost as certain, but instead of humiliation, the bearing of jeers and the witnessing of jubilation and conceit, there would be triumph. On one hand the rope and shame; on the other, a death fit for the daring, a stirring tale for future campfires, and the baffling of the unclean pack. Besides, the pack was greedy for this bay mare: should a jackal ride what a king might envy?

He had heard men talk of The Break, which none had

dared to jump. Some there were who had ridden forth boastingly to prove it possible, to be pointed out admiringly as the man who had made that leap; but face to face with a thousand feet of void their spirits had cringed and turned them back again. On his way up the trail he had scrutinized it while he rode past, and his memory preserved a sharp picture of a second ledge just below the ragged lip of the break itself. Ages ago, it was said, a natural bridge had spanned the canyon here; but before the memory of man, long before, the connecting span had fallen. Hollister urged the mare impatiently, hot with eagerness to study The Break purposefully. Time pressed, and he knew he would have to ride back a short way for a running start. A second report rang out far below him and he heard the faint whine of the lead. As he rode around an out-thrust spur on the mountain side, where the trail was forced into a perilous curve on the very edge of a ledge, a backward glance showed him that the guard in the pass had spared two men to close in on him from the rear. The puff of rock dust and the spanging scream of the glancing bullet told him that The Break was the only way remaining.

He checked the horse and faced the narrowed chasm, his scalp tingling and cold ripples playing along his spine. It might be done, but there would not be an inch to spare. The direction in which the take-off lay made him ignore the lip of the upper ledge across the gap, and drink in every detail of the second one. It was ten feet lower than the lip, a little to the right and in line with the last third of the take-off. Still unde-

cided and chilled by the thought of such a desperate gamble, he whirled the mare and rode back up the trail, and as he reached a point from where he could glance along the narrow path he caught sight of a swift movement and knew that two men had thrown themselves from their horses and sought shelter behind the rocks. The puff of smoke which burst into sight instantly was followed by a sharp tug at his high-crowned sombrero, and a warning shout rang through the canyon.

"Easy, boys: we got him stopped!"

He jumped the mare back behind the jutting rocks, wheeled her sharply, and as she dropped to all-fours he sunk the spurs into flesh that was strange to them. With their rolling slash the die was cast. The bay swept down the sloping trail like a skimming bird, flashed up the gentle rise leading to The Break, and shot out over the chasm, a curving, glistening, red-brown streak.

Hollister saw the lip of the upper ledge leap to meet him and then rise with sudden swiftness above his head. The dark gray canyon wall hurtled at him like a thing of life. There came a jarring shock, his saddle numbed him with one smashing blow, there was a shower of sand and pebbles, the sound of frantic scrambling, and he pitched forward and landed in a heap among the bowlders with the breath driven from his body. His mind was clear but his body powerless. He saw the mare struggling madly to save herself, and slipping slowly backward. For a moment her frantic hind hoofs caught on a ragged seam in the face of the ledge and she hung poised while he tried desperately to move. The

picture he saw was so vivid but yet so detached that it seemed unreal. Before him, a few feet from his powerless hands, the mare slipped more and more; beyond her a compact group of horsemen sitting their saddles as rigidly and motionlessly as if they had been turned to stone, their rifles forgotten in the sheer amazement and admiration for such a feat. Hollister stirred, but as he did so the struggling bay slipped from his sight without a sound; the rigid group across the canyon broke the spell that gripped them and raised their weapons. The fugitive rolled off the bowlder he had been draped on and the harmless bullets left bright lead streaks before they screamed, as if in baffled rage, high above.

Rolling and dragging himself, Hollister gained a more protected position, safe from every angle of their gun fire. In less than a second he had gained more than half a day on the shouting jackals, found himself in country where their horses were worthless even after they had gone around through the pass, and lost the only living thing he had learned to love. For half a day he was safe, but he knew too well the spite behind that driving pursuit to believe that the chase was over. He had gained temporary safety and a breathing spell, but he was a man afoot. They would shift their cordon and comb every yard along his side of the canyon, and with hot eagerness when they realized that with the bay went his rifle, his extra ammunition, and everything but what he wore. He had left only his Colt and a limited supply of cartridges with which to fight and to obtain food. As he reviewed the situation, an exultant

yell rang out across the canyon and the tattoo of quickly moving hoofs rolled along the narrow trail in the direction of the pass above the canyon's head.

Hollister was becoming himself again and slipped haltingly back among the rocks, careful not to show himself in case they had left a hidden guard to pick him off. His daring leap had but taken him out of one desperate situation to fling him into another, unless—— The thought gripped him. Audacity had given him this breathing space; perhaps it would give him more. They expected him to flee, to stumble away from them and at last to hole up, his back to the wall, and bide the hopeless issue. His solar plexus once more was following the even tenor of its ways and his movements began to show snap and certainty. He turned abruptly from the course he instinctively had taken and headed toward the upper end of the canyon; and as he pressed forward on his awkward but swift stride, owing to the rough going and the high-heeled riding boots, he heard a strengthening note in the rapidly decreasing sound of the posse's horses. Through the heavy diminuendo there crept a thinner crescendo, the swiftly falling hoofbeats of one horse which grew louder as the others died out. He slipped to a place from where he could see the canyon trail, and grinned sardonically. Pounding along it came a horseman riding as hard as he dared, and there seemed to be little caution so far as his horsemanship was concerned. His quirt rose and fell as he raced parallel with death, never more than a few feet from him, and went rocketing down the narrow trail as if he had urgent need to get somewhere in a hurry.

Hollister nodded grimly and spoke to himself, one of the habits of solitude.

"Go it, Whittaker! Take 'em th' news. Yo're ridin' more for me than you are for them. There's a bank robber and a murderer afoot in th' hills—he's safe game at rifle ranges. Fools! Blind fools! There ain't a *man* among 'em!"

He went back again and walked rapidly on, careful to step on rock and to break no twigs of the steadily increasing growth. If he had an even break in luck they would have more to talk about than his leap across the canyon.

CHAPTER II

AUDACITY

THE harsh, stark colouring under the sun's glare softened on bald ridges, rock walls, and tumbled detritus; the vivid contrasts of golden highlights among the black shadows along the pine-clad slopes faded and merged; the scars of slides which gashed the greenery of the mountain sides like livid welts against the sombre tones of the ramparts changed insensibly. Already in the valleys and gorges sharp definitions were growing blurred, the clear-cut creeks and ravines, pastures and knife-like ridges widened as they died. Deeper, softer tones; warm browns, lavenders, and mystic purples stealthily crept higher and higher up the defiant steeps, whose tops still flung through the hushed air the weakening, ruddy gleams of the reflected sun. The browns and lavenders ran swiftly higher up the bare rock mountain sides, a fast-mounting tide of colour; great areas of purples submerged the piney greens of the timber, pulsing higher as wavelets run up a beach. The purples spread sideways as they crept upward, overflowing on the browns and lavenders, mixing, changing, dominating. The vivid streaks of sunlight lay along the higher peaks like golden sands above some inky lake. Up and up they retreated, great gaps of

deep blue sky tearing the aureate band into isolated fragments. For a moment a breathless hush seemed to grip the mountains; and then the shrinking gold on the last high peak ran up the rocky tip and disappeared. Below it the browns fled from the pursuing lavenders, to die in turn on the thrusting peak before the resistless surge of the triumphant purples. The day was dead, and twilight reigned, warm, pulsing, mystic. Of the diurnal changes this was the most beautiful, and the saddest.

Hollister made his silent, cautious way to the edge of the thoroughfare over the pass. From where he had lain safely hidden for the last few hours, within a stone's throw of the streaming man hunt, he had seen the jackals arrive and depart. Man by man the valley was emptying itself at the urge of vindictive spite. Exultant laughter, venomous sneers, ribald raillery and a few scanty tributes to the jumping of the canyon marked the coming and the going of the man hunters. A certain tenseness which these same voices had rung with during the last two days now was missing: their quarry had lost his rifle. Barring heavy-footed blunders the pack could do its hunting in safety and its shooting at the longer ranges.

"Silly" Adkins, the valley's half-wit, who paid a desperate price for some law of nature broken along the line of his descent, remained to watch half a score of horses, whose owners hunted afoot with commendable caution among the rocky chaos above the canyon's rim. This was one thing Silly could do, since his life-long training had been the herding of horses. His weap-

onry consisted of a cylinderless revolver and a worthless rifle, for the habitués of the valley were not guilty of rank carelessness where the safety of their skins was concerned. Half-wits do unaccountable things, and deadly weapons are not for such as these.

Silly hummed a ballad of vile words to an innocuous nursery air, painstakingly taught him by a group of "jokers," who had grown convulsed at the thought that, like as not, Silly would sing the ballad aloud in church if the mood took hold of him, or pour it into the defenseless ears of some innocent maid. Through this temple of twilight sounded the vile song, profaning the sacred silences. His vacuous laughter rang out like a hollow mockery, a very ghost of laughter, and he fell to playing with the buttons of his coat.

The purples deepened. Already the lower levels were submerged in a rapidly rising sea of ink. Long black splashes ran swiftly up the deeper scars of the mountain sides, wavered, and then overflowed to swallow the shrinking pines. Overhead appeared the skirmishers of the starry hosts, gathering boldness with the growing dark. The advancing blackness of the lower levels splashed the harried purples with long and instant strokes, the insistent wedges ceaselessly expanding. There came a smooth and silent rush, and in an instant the topmost peaks lay black against the luminous sky.

Somewhere among the rocks a chipmunk scolded, a rake of a chipmunk, abroad when by all rights he should have been asleep. The scolding was so well done that without hesitation Silly turned to locate the sound, his loose jaw distorting a crafty grin. Stark cruelty flung a

gleam into the lustreless, vacant eyes: what fun it was to stun these exquisite bits of Nature's handiwork with their sleek gold sides striped with black; to stun them and hear the fragile leg bones snap under his stubby fingers. Not a dog in the valley could rival Silly's diabolical cunning in the capture of these little creatures, for he had made it an art. His duty forgotten in the alluring promise of the hunt, he started up the slope in the direction of the scolding chatter, in his right hand a stone; in his left, a club. Again the chipmunk scolded, to the right. Silly wheeled and changed his course, his eyes on a shadowy bowlder, his movements noiseless. He stalked his prey with the caution and patience of a hunting cat, oblivious to all else. Higher and higher he crept, farther and farther from the horses, but as he went up the bank Jed Hollister was creeping down it toward the half-wit's charges. He reached them, found them in a compact bunch, and drove them off slowly.

Below Silly the narrow pass lay like a smudge of soot across a gray-black slate. The sounds of walking horses were barred from his consciousness by the intentness of his stalking. Over his head there streaked a shadowy blotch, a hunting owl coasting on silent wings. He froze behind the bowlder, gripped his club and struck swiftly, felt a solid impact and heard the bird fall into the brush. Gone were all thoughts of chipmunks: here was a nobler and a dangerous victim, armed for desperate combat. The sounds of the walking horses had grown softer and softer and at last could be heard no more. The stunned owl, recovering its faculties, arose silently, coasted straight from the mountain side toward

the canyon, and disappeared. At length Silly gave up the hunt and returned to his duties of herder; but the duties had disappeared with the chipmunk. Without a moment's hesitation the half-wit lumbered along the pass, away from the valley. He would find his missing charges at a rain-water pool lying part way down the western slope.

At the head of the canyon, Hollister, mounted on the best of the captured animals, drew up and made a quick decision. If he followed the comparative safety of the canyon trail the sounds of his horse would be heard by the searchers across the chasm, but they might be accepted as indicating the desertion of some member of the posse. Fool's Trail, leading across the rocky ridge at right angles to the other, was not one to be followed after dark. Bad as the canyon trail was, this latter was worse. He turned his horse and drove the small herd before him south from the canyon's head, over the crest of the ridge, and then scattered it. Returning, he rode straight for the canyon trail and along it toward the valley. To his left, high up on the dividing ridge of the watershed, there glowed the feeble flame of a match: a winking pin-point, like the pulsing light of a firefly, answered farther down the slope. The cautious cordon was tightening, drawing closer; but the fox, which had played chipmunk, was free and doubling on its trail, and the trail was one of vengeance. For it there remained one more rôle in a rising progression, for already the chipmunk which had changed into a fox was becoming a wolf, a single-hunting lobo, the dreaded killer of the hills.

Hollister's knees were pressing the sides of his mount when he caught the rhythmic sound of a walking horse coming slowly nearer up the trail. Just ahead of him, outlined sharply against the star-riddled sky, was the knife-like profile of a thrusting point of rock, around which the narrow trail sharply turned. The bend was abrupt and the shadows deep. He forced his mount close against the wall and slid his left hand forward to the animal's muzzle to check instantly any inquiring whinney. Nearer and nearer came the horseman. Soon he was riding along the other side of the rugged spur. Now he turned it and came toward the rigid horseman hidden in the blacker shadows, trusting all to his mount, his eyes sweeping the mountain side across the canyon, where winking lights told him he would find his friends. There came a sudden start beneath the saddle, a panicky, high-flung head before his inquiring eyes, and he peered into the darkness along the wall.

"Who's that?" he cried, startled by this sudden materialization under his very eyes.

"Bud Jennison," came a growled reply. "Scared you, huh?"

For a moment the newcomer hesitated, desperately searching his memory to justify the sound of that voice with the name it claimed. The instant's hesitation spelled his doom. His moving hand, hidden by the darkness, had the gun half drawn when Jed's restless horse surged out from the deeper shadows, struck the other shoulder to shoulder and drove it sidewise before it could set itself to meet the shock. The sliding fore-hoofs slid off the rocky trail, there was a blurred drop-

ping movement and from the inky depths of the canyon arose a choking, slobbering scream. Silence. Hollister's pulse throbbed surgingly; his heart beat like the hollow boom of a South Sea war drum. He found himself counting the accelerated, welling strokes, running the count back to start even with the disappearance of the horse and rider. At a significant sound from out of the depths his tally stood at twelve—or was it more? It seemed ages.

He pushed on again, sobered, the keen edge gone from his desire for vengeance. The desire still stirred strongly within him, but something far short of death now would appease it and wipe clean the slate. Coming to a turn in the trail, where it widened gradually but steadily and drew farther from the chasm's rim, he urged his mount into a lope and went swaying down the lower reaches of the slope. Below him now appeared yellow lights in expectant houses scattered far and wide throughout the valley. He rode well around the cluster which marked the nucleus of the settlement, forging through the dark toward one guiding beacon, a beacon treacherous to the hand that lighted it. There waited the autocrat of all that grassy valley; the holder of notes and mortgages, silky strangling cords of the law, and he a lawful garroter. Under his gloved steel hand danced and bowed the accredited assistants, the court and its judgments, the sheriff and his writs.

There had been a robbery, a most atrocious crime in the eyes of the law's servants. HIS bank had been despoiled of twenty-odd thousand dollars in gold and bills. The old iron safe had been found open to the light, like a

toothless maw gaping with amazement; halfway across the plaster-littered floor lay the buckled door, an epic on the vanities of life. Last and least was a huddled figure in a far corner of the room, a mere mote added to the greater crime; for the life of the watchman had belonged but to him, while the treasure lost was lost to HIM.

The baying pack had gathered to sniff the dusty room and all the region roundabout; keen eyes had singled out from among the wreckage a heavy pocket-knife, its bone handle carved to look like the roughness of a stag's horn. The broken little blade was all that was needed to identify its owner; and the man who identified it as Hollister's settled all doubts, because he was the man who had borrowed the tool and returned it with that broken blade. His eyes warmed momentarily as he recalled the look of scorn on the owner's face when the damage had been discovered; and the identification was repeated with acerbity.

Half-wits have their purposes, sometimes good despite their training. Silly Adkins's blighted mind had absorbed enough of what he had seen and heard near the safe to crave to be the first to jeer the criminal. While the pack sniffed and searched and made ready for its onslaught, Silly was well on his galloping way to jeer and torture. He found Hollister saddling his best horse, a champing bay mare with a coat like silk, and out of the confused and jumbled flood pouring from the half-wit's slack mouth the rancher pieced his danger. His mind leaped swiftly over the impressions it had stored up of the various leading figures of the valley's life; his dis-

agreement with this man, his trouble with that one. His decision was instant. Rider and bay mare had leaped to the house and after a moment spurned the valley's floor. Over his shoulder the scornful rider flung a threat, a promise, and a warning to the gaping half-wit's eager ears.

"I'll be back some day!"

He was making good that message much sooner than he had expected he would. The hum of the insects in the grass along the road hushed even with the running horse, like the oily trough of a gliding ground-swell, a swiftly moving level of silence between the cresting noises of the night. To listening ears along the way the rolling hoofbeats meant only the passing of another courier about his master's business: truly no effort was being spared in the running down of this criminal.

Hollister swung from the hard-packed road to the turf alongside it and slowed his mount to a walk. Fate had willed that he always should be crossing the big man's path, until he had gained a passionate enmity, but one which had been masked fairly well. It had started on the day when Hollister, deep in conversation with a companion before the door of the sacred bank, had blocked the big man's exit from the building. He had not known this until he felt himself roughly pushed off the narrow sidewalk and had turned, smouldering with anger, to see who had done it. The big man, striding contemptuously on his important way, with all the poise of him radiating insolence, suddenly felt an iron grip on his swaggering shoulder and found himself spinning around to look into a pair of blazing eyes. He had

shaken himself in a vain effort to get free from the painful grasp and then found himself shaken until his teeth rattled. Hollister, with a mighty heave, had hurled the banker from him, off the walk and into the dust of the street.

"Any manners you ain't got, I'll teach you," he called, and turned back calmly to continue his conversation; but to his surprise he found his companion had disappeared.

"You puppy!" the big man had sputtered, apoplectic with rage at this lese majesty. "You insolent puppy! I've a mind to horsewhip you!"

Hollister had stepped quickly across the street, yanked a whip from a settler's wagon and with a leap thrust it into the pudgy hands.

"If you was a man you might," he had replied, stepping back a pace; "bein' a fat coward, you won't."

He had waited a moment and then, wrenching the whip from the loose grasp of the banker, put it back where he had found it and walked on down the street.

This episode had been but the beginning of a series of disagreements between the two men; fate fairly seemed to outdo itself in their entangling. They passed in quick review before the horseman and brought a sneer to his face: there would be one more episode.

A quarter of a mile from the house Hollister drew up, dismounted, and dropped the reins over the head of the horse. He went forward on foot and paused in the shadows of the trees not far from the lighted window. The lower sash was up, the curtain even with it. William Glenn sat before a square table, his elbows on it,

his chin in his hands, and stared unseeingly at the opposite wall. The last courier had reported the fugitive afoot on Crow Mountain, armed only with a Colt; every last man had been drawn from the valley and its other exits to join the converging cordon. During the night they would be content to keep the line unpierced, but at dawn they would press on and up. He need expect no further news until the next day.

The banker nodded with swift satisfaction and turned to glance out of the window in the direction of the distant mountain. From where he sat the wall of the house lay between, and he arose and went to the door for one final gloating look. The expression on his face was a composite of triumphant malice and avarice, for his thoughts ran deep and far ahead of the present moment. He turned the knob and opened the door, and coincident with the sudden pastiness of his face, the relaxed jaw and the sagging of his knees came an acute pain in his stomach from the rough jab of a cold gun muzzle. His eyes popped, his vocal cords constricted painfully to a state of paralysis, and a look of horror filled his eyes.

CHAPTER III

HOLDING THE SACK

"EVENIN', Glenn," said a low, cold voice as its possessor stepped inside and closed the door behind him. His quick glance showed him the room in all its details and he went hurriedly to the window, lowered the sash and drew down the curtain. He leaned against the square table as if to push it against the wall to make more room for what he had in mind, but checked himself.

"Wife home?" he demanded.

Glenn managed to answer. "Upstairs, asleep," he gulped.

"Too bad," grunted the intruder. "I come in to kill you with my bare hands." He hesitated. By no stretch of the imagination could Mrs. Glenn be accused of having any of the more prominent traits of the head of the house. She was a kindly, motherly woman who went out of her way to worry about and to help others; she always had a smile and a kind word for everyone except Hollister, and for him she had a cold nod. In this she was justified by her wifely position. He remembered that whatever rare acts of decency William Glenn had done they popularly had been attributed to the influence of his wife. She had aged greatly in the

last few years and her face was sad beyond words. One reason for this was that her son was said to have been drowned in the great freshet of four years before. There were some who cautiously denied this and said the boy had been forced to leave home because of his father's despicable nature. There was a daughter who was finishing her education in the East and who now spent her vacations travelling abroad. She had not been home since Hollister had come to the valley. It was said that her mother had been taken desperately ill two years ago, when the girl had gone to Europe direct from her school for her first transatlantic voyage. From that time on Mrs. Glenn had been another woman. These thoughts flashed through Hollister's mind and jumbled his emotions and purposes. He came to a sudden decision.

"Take yore hat," he ordered, indicating with a careless thumb the clean, new sombrero hanging from a chair back. "I'm needin' safe conduct out of th' valley, seein' it's guarded so tight. Yo're ridin' with me, *pronto,* an' quiet." He followed his host's hypnotized gaze and sneered. "I ain't bustin' safes to-night. Get that hat, or come without it—no, not without it: that wouldn't look nat'ral, nohow."

Glenn was incapable of movement, his eyes still on the little iron safe in the corner, and he mumbled incoherently.

The intruder glanced again in the direction of the other's set stare and a sudden grim smile flickered across his face. Here was something he had not thought of before. He passed his hand over the banker's body,

walked to the table, drew paper and pen to him, scratched a hurried line, signed it and pushed it aside.

"My ranch cost me four thousan' dollars," he said, looking up. "I've improved it a lot. Worth seven now. Add one more for th' trouble you've made me an' th' risks I've run. There's a quit-claim to th' ranch. Dig me up eight thousan' dollars quick!"

It did not strike him as being an unusual sum for a banker to keep in a toy safe in his own home. Bankers always had plenty of money lying about.

To Glenn's suspicious mind this was not a sign of ignorance in his captor, but one of uncanny knowledge. The banker stood like a man in a trance, but a low-voiced threat sent him staggering to the little safe, where his fumbling fingers, apparently needing no conscious direction from memory, clumsily turned the dial from force of habit, and after a few moments and a few bungling attempts the tumblers lined up. Counting money and manipulating his combinations were two things the banker could do automatically. He pulled open the door and pawed aimlessly among the bundles of bills and the clean white sacks, spilling some of each to the floor. Hollister stepped quickly forward, glanced at the figures stamped on the sacks and on the paper bands about the sheaves of notes, selected enough of both kinds to total the selling price of the ranch, jammed the notes into his pockets and gripped the sacks in his left hand. Glenn slowly closed the safe, automatically spun the combination knob, and then looked up at the tall, grim figure near the table; and across his face there crept a faint look of hope and relief.

At this change in the banker's expression, Hollister grew very thoughtful and studied the man before him. Under his searching eyes the expression changed to one of panicky fear, and Hollister nodded.

"Get yore hat. I'm wastin' too much time on you!"

The other did not move and Hollister, frowning, reached for the hat and placed it on the sweat-covered bald head. He was about to push the banker toward the door when he had another sudden thought. He placed the sacks of specie on the floor, reached out his long left arm, and pulled the banker to the table.

"I've heard it said us criminals allus make a mistake," he sneered. "I'll do my damnedest not to. Set down here an' write what I tell you. In case yo're missed it'll explain it." He waited a moment and then shoved the unresisting man into the chair. "Write that yo're goin' out to see how th' chase is comin' along, an' for 'em not to worry. Damn you, *write!*"

The scratching of the pen sounded unnaturally loud and when the note was written Hollister scrutinized it, shook his head, and shoved it into his pocket.

"Every wobbly stroke says you was scared near to death—it's worse than nothin'. Come to think of it, you ain't th' kind of a man that would take th' trouble to save yore wife any worry—Bill Glenn would never write no note. Glad I thought of that in time. You've got just one chance for yore life: get out of that door, an' do it quick."

He picked up the sacks and stepped toward the kitchen to get the food he so badly needed. With the impelling muzzle of the six-gun against the small of his

back the banker went ahead, watched the supplies tumbling into an empty sack, and then stumbled to the stable on uncertain feet. Somehow he managed to obey the man who ordered him to saddle a horse. In a few minutes the animal was carrying double across the pasture, and not much later two men loped along the road leading to Griggs' Pass, one ahead of the other, a lariat connecting them. When the last house had been left well behind, the man in the rear laughed nastily and spoke.

"Now that there ain't no chance of anybody makin' complications, I'll tell you that I know, like yourself, that there ain't a man guardin' any of th' ways out of this valley. They're all up on Crow Mountain waitin' for daylight. I don't need no safe conduct, an' you might as well know that ain't why I'm totin' you along with me. I'm leavin' you to guess why I am."

A torrent of supplications burst from the man ahead, to be profanely checked by the other.

"You shut up!" snapped Hollister, moving ahead and jabbing the Colt into his companion's back. "I'll tell you when it's time to talk!"

Mile followed mile up the rising trail. Higher and higher they rode, and dawn was still an hour away when they crossed the top of the pass and began the long descent. Griggs' Valley lay behind them and the rising sun brought to one man the promise of freedom and life; to the other, a vomiting spell from fear. The trail wound and dipped through a fairyland in the early morning light, its beauties wasted because of the passions and fears of men. The timber became thicker,

verdure increased with every downward rod, and under a first-growth stand of pines, where the earth was carpeted with clean pine needles and where the slanting rays of the sun lighted up the dark resinous tree trunks, Hollister called a halt.

"This'll do. Get off."

The last few hours had been the refinement of cruelty to the banker, who firmly had believed that every step of the journey was taking him that much closer to death. He had passed through nearly all the moods of desperation: supplication, confession, prayers, tears—every one but resistance. This latter must be the final essay, for to fail in it was to hasten the thing most dreaded. But every time he had tried to speak, his inexorable abductor had stopped him with word and gun. Now he drew rein and fell rather than dismounted, his legs treacherous and uncertain.

Hollister waved him from the horse, sneering with contempt at such a pitiful object that was known as a man. A sardonic grin came over his face: this was the man of whom Griggs' Valley stood in awe, who cracked the whip they danced to.

"I come all th' way back from Crow Mountain to get you, Glenn," he said. "Got anythin' to say?"

The banker's words poured out in a torrent, coherent, incoherent, maudlin from fear, interspersed with sobs. He ran the gamut of fear and finished by screaming his pleas and curses mixed in a senseless jumble as he grovelled on the ground. Hollister stood unmoved, disgusted, cold, contemptuous. He hadn't intended to kill this man, but to beat him within an inch of his life.

Now he found he could not beat so pitiful a thing; the thought of his hard knuckles sinking into the soft, pudgy flesh nearly sickened him. It would leave a memory that years would not efface. He'd see that bruised, pasty mass quivering and bloody in his sleep.

"I was told they found my knife," he said. "Near th' safe; an' that Jepson was killed: his head bashed in from behind. How'd my knife get there? Look at me, damn you! How'd my knife get there for Simpkins to identify?"

"Jed!" whispered Glenn, licking his pallid lips and pulling at his fingers. "If——"

"Don't call me Jed!" snapped Hollister, his eyes blazing. "I don't want no damned familiarity from you! How'd it get there?"

"Mr. Hollister, if I—if I—I tell you that, will you let me go? Say you won't kill me!"

Hollister laughed mirthlessly. "I don't have to make no promises. I'll listen if you'll talk fast an' say somethin'. It's yore only chance."

"I put th' knife there! When you rode past my house last week it fell out of yore pocket when you pulled out yore tobacco sack. After you rode on I went out an' kicked it into th' weeds where you couldn't find it if you come back lookin' for it. I'll tell 'em how I put it there! Help me God I will! I'll tell 'em you didn't have nothin' to do with th' bank!"

Hollister's photographic memory put before him certain impressions of the last few hours and their meanings began to grow plain.

"When'd you put it there?"

Glenn pulled himself together a little and took plenty of time before answering. He needed all his wits now.

"When it was discovered. I dropped it in some pieces of plaster from th' ceilin' an' covered it over. I'll tell 'em the truth!"

"What time was th' robbery discovered?"

"When th' blast went off. Near daylight."

"When was th' knife found?"

"Soon after: a few minutes later."

"Who found it?"

"Don't know. Honest I don't!"

"You say you found it in the road, after it fell out of my pocket?" asked Hollister. "Think close, now: which foot did you kick it with?"

Glenn showed his surprise. "What you say?" he asked, doubting he had heard aright.

"Which foot did you kick it with? Think close an' answer true!"

"Why, I—I—think it was——"

"Don't guess! Stand up an' see if you can repeat the motion."

Glenn, his mind on his feet, arose and experimented first with one foot and then with the other. He pointed to his right.

"That's th' one."

"Reckon so: you seem to use it most nat'ral," agreed Hollister, and then asked another question: "What time did you get to th' bank after th' robbery?"

"Soon's I could. Mebby half an hour. Took time for 'em to come for me, an' I had to dress an' saddle th' hoss."

"How long did that take?"

"Few minutes."

"Don't lie! You just said half an hour. I reckon yore mind was on th' foot you kicked th' knife with! Half an hour's right, ain't it?" demanded Hollister, toying with the sheathed Colt. His face was like a thundercloud. "If yo're aimin' to live, talk truth!"

"Yes; half an hour," admitted the banker, wiping the sweat from his face.

"Where'd you put th' money you stole?"

"What? This ain't no time for jokin', Hollister!"

"You had it out of th' safe all th' time, didn't you?"

"My God, what you mean?" screamed the other, pulling at his fingers until his ring slipped off and fell to the ground.

"You fired th' blast to make it look right, an' ran like hell to yore cayuse, didn't you? Talk up!"

"What makes you talk like that, Hollister? What makes you try to lay it onto me? I'm willin' to say *you* didn't do it. It ain't fair to put it onto *me!*"

"Because my knife was found on the floor before you got there after the robbery!" sneered Hollister. "That means it was dropped there right after th' safe was blowed, or just before. You admitted droppin' it. That right?"

Glenn raved and swore, but it availed him nothing, and finally he admitted that he had dropped the knife when he lighted the fuse.

Hollister laughed. "You was eyin' yore safe when I was in yore house. There was an awful lot of money in it. That's th' bank's money, ain't it?"

Glenn nodded and began to speak again, but his captor cut him short.

"All of which ain't interestin' me none. What did you hit Jepson with, an' why?"

Glenn collapsed, and it was minutes before he could speak with any degree of coherence, and then he steadfastedly denied the assault.

Hollister nodded. "There won't be no trouble provin' that, as long as you stole th' money, an' blew th' safe, an' dropped my knife there to be found. They all tell th' same story. Might as well own up. You will if you want to live very long!"

After a lengthy wrangle Glenn told it all in detail. The watchman had been asleep in his chair, his back to the safe. Hoping to work quietly enough not to awaken Jepson until the blast went off, the banker had placed the cartridge and laid the fuse, but just as he was about to light it the watchman stirred and, finding himself in a desperate situation, Glenn had struck him over the head with the crowbar he had brought to force the bars of the window for the purpose of making it look like an outside job. In his panic he had struck harder than he realized, and he barely had sense enough to light the fuse before he fled.

"Huh!" sneered Hollister. "An' you want mercy!"

"Gimme a chance! For God's sake gimme a chance! I was willin' to give you one! I was willin' to tell 'em you didn't drop that knife."

"Hell of a chance you gave *me!*" retorted Hollister, picturing what he had been through the past few days. "*Fine* chance! You reckon I'm fool enough to go back

an' turn you over? With yore friends around you, you'd laugh at th' idea of makin' a confession to me. You'd deny placin' th' knife. You'd set back an' turn 'em on me." He roared with laughter at the thought of committing such an act of rank stupidity.

"But you ain't goin' to kill me! I'll give you a writin' sayin' I dropped th' knife when I got there that mornin'."

"An' swear it was forced from you at a gun muzzle!" snapped Hollister. "It won't do. What good would it do me to show 'em that stolen cash in your safe?" he sneered. "I know th' folks in that valley as well as you do."

"But you ain't goin' to kill me, Hollister?" pleaded the other, frantically. "Think of my wife! It'll kill her, too!"

Hollister sneered. "I got it. Yo're goin' to walk back—it ain't more'n twenty, thirty miles. If you can't do it in one day, you can do it in two. Mebby they'll be huntin' for you purty soon, an' save you some of it. I'm ridin' on. Th' valley is bound to change. Strangers will be comin' in all th' time. There ain't no tellin' about that, but I'll be back, mebby with friends. You listen to me, Glenn: sooner or later I'm comin' back to tell about you. Sooner or later you'll feel the hangman's knot, an' feel yore feet kickin' open th' way to hell. If you run away I'll foller, an' kill you shore. Stand up, an' start walkin'. You got a long way to go, an' so have I; but *I'm comin' back, shore as hell!* Vamoose!"

Glenn, so carried away by the thought of escaping a

swift death that he did not understand what life was going to be for him, staggered to his feet and went stumbling up the trail, not once looking behind him.

Hollister turned toward his horse, saw something shining in a ray of sunlight and picked up the object. It was a heavy gold seal ring, the letters deeply cut. He turned it over in his hand and was about to toss it into the brush when he checked the motion, thought a moment, and then slipped the ring into a pocket. It might come in handy when he returned.

Mounting, Hollister rode to the edge of the trail and looked after the dejected figure toiling up the slope, and he rocked with laughter. From the moment his captive had admitted dropping the knife he had known what his revenge would be, a revenge greater than a brutal thrashing or a quick killing; a revenge that would turn a living man into a squirming gargoyle of fear, every hour of the day, every day of the week, month after month; a revenge that draped the hangman's noose around the fat throat sleeping or waking. He watched the broken man stumbling slowly up the trail, growing smaller and smaller until the spur of a great hill hid him from sight. Then he saw that the banker's horse was securely fastened to the saddle, turned his own animal southward and kneed it forward.

"Bronch," he chuckled, "I'm shore leavin' him holdin' th' sack!"

CHAPTER IV

A TRAIL CONFUSED

HOLLISTER rode hard all that day and the next, changing horses every hour or two, and riding Glenn's more and harder than the one he had taken from Silly's herd. Early on the third day he stripped the saddle from Glenn's horse, tossed it into a ravine, and let the animal wander. For the next week he rode steadily from early morning until nearly dark, resting his mount when his judgment told him to. He had headed steadily southward, bearing a little to the east, passing around scattered habitations and little settlements, but now his food was gone and the horse was about done. At last, weary and hungry from a twenty-four-hour fast, he saw the lights of a small town as he pushed to the top of a hill. He pulled up and considered it.

Three hours later he had ridden around the town and was approaching it from the south. He swung to the ground, threw the saddle, bridle, and rifle into a brush-choked draw, slapped the weary horse on the rump and watched it go to grazing. Sighing, he pulled his belt a notch tighter and struck off toward the town.

Half a mile from the grouped lights he came to the edge of a deeply rutted road, and as he paused to rest

and look around, the sounds of cracking whips, roared curses, and the clatter and jingle and squeak of a wagon train caught his attention. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and slipped into a clump of brush to wait.

The gleam of a lantern, swung from a rear axle, winked rapidly at him as the spokes of the wheel passed before it. A shuddering squeak at regular intervals told of the need of axle grease as the great wagon and its six mules drew near and passed. Behind it came another, the second driver caustically commenting upon the laziness and economy of the man who neglected to grease properly. A third and a fourth vehicle came into sight and others could be heard in the dark back on the road.

Hollister stepped from his hiding place and followed the last wagon of the first group, far enough from it and those following to be unobserved in the night. He entered the town with the train, rubbed his hands on the grease-rimmed end of a hub, smeared a little of the pungent compound on his face, and swaggered down the main street where men of various races and hues sauntered or loafed.

The saloon was noisy and well filled. Several card games were going, and at the far end of the bar a tipsy puncher insisted on singing "Home Sweet Home," seemingly with no desire to go there. The singing was all right in itself, horrible as it was; but his insistence grew and included something which was not all right. While he favoured them with song they must stop what they were doing and listen to him. Two tough-looking

specimens wandered to the bar, one on each side of him, draped themselves upon it and quarrelled with the bartender about their inexplicable lack of credit.

The puncher ignored them and spoke to the room in general. His first words were curses, applied to every man present. Hollister at that moment stepped through the door, stopped in his tracks, and then quietly backed against the door casing.

"Now, we're all goin' t'sing th' chorus," said the puncher, rocking back on his heels and groping for the gun at his thigh. "Any —— —— 'at don't sing is goin'——"

The two tough-looking specimens moved in practiced harmony, as if repeating something often done before. One threw his arms around the puncher while the other, tossing the held man's gun on the bar, struck swiftly at its owner's jaw and then bent over, grasping his ankles as the captive wilted. At the door they stopped, nodded, and with one swinging movement threw their load into the street. At once the attention of the room's habitués returned to their previous interests, and the episode, like many others of the same kind, was considered closed: but this was one occasion when it only was beginning. The needless blow on the jaw from a half-breed professional bouncer and against a frankly drunken man whose arms had been held did not set well with the man against the door casing. Almost without thought he snapped forward and struck twice, once to the right and once to the left. It appeared that his right arm was the stronger, for while the bouncer who stopped the left fist only sagged to the

floor and rolled over, his esteemed partner left the floor entirely, landed in the midst of a tight and exciting poker game, took the table and one player with him, and glanced off the stomach of a Mexican monte player.

"We will all sing 'Home Sweet Home,'" said Hollister.

At the words the tipsy puncher staggered through the door to dare them to throw him out again, believed what he saw and heard, grinned at his music-loving companion and sang as well as his aching jaw would permit. As a song it was not much of a success, but the tipsy puncher liked it so well that he started on another verse. Hollister gripped him with the left hand and pushed him toward the door.

"Get outside an' wait for me," he ordered, and then spoke to the bartender. "I'm givin' you a dangerous job, because if you make a false play you'll never sell no more coloured alcohol. Pick up that gun by th' muzzle an' toss it to me. Toss it plumb straight an' easy!"

The bartender grudgingly obeyed and Hollister, catching the weapon in his left hand without losing sight of the scowling faces before him, backed through the door and stepped swiftly aside. Grabbing the loquacious and inquisitive puncher, Hollister pulled him into the darkness and around the rear of the next store. Figures were pouring into the street in front of the saloon, but took care not to push their search too far.

Hollister dragged his unsteady friend farther from the

scene of action, propped him against a stable, and looked at him in disgust.

"You sing like a jackass an' you act like a jackass," he said. "I reckon that makes you one. I went into that saloon to find out somethin', but you spoiled my play. Where do th' bullwhackers herd up in this town?"

"You a mule-skinner?" asked the other, straightening up by sections.

"Where do they hang out?"

"Fowler's, an' th' wagons."

"Where's th' best place to get a cayuse an' a saddle?"

"What you do with yourn?"

"A man settin' in th' front end of a wagon don't have none. Who's got th' best cayuses?"

"Quittin'?"

"Quittin' what?"

"Mule-skinnin', of course."

Hollister nodded in the dark. "I don't like mule-skinnin'."

"Shake," said his companion, shoving out a friendly hand. "Next thing to sheep nursin', it is. Fust thing you know you'd be growing whiskers an' spittin' 'baccy juice through 'em. Come on, Skinner: le's get a drink."

He slobbered, wiped his mouth, and peered into his companion's face. "Any relation o' Bud Skinner?" he asked with a vast suspicion.

Hollister shook his head. "None a-tall. Where'll I buy a cayuse?"

The puncher laughed foolishly, slapping his thigh. "Ha-ha-ha! Yo're right—ha-ha-ha—you ain't no re-

lation to Bud—ha-ha-ha! 'Scuse me, friend: jest struck me funny, a Skinner wantin' to *buy* a cayuse! C'mon: goin' to buy you a drink." He pushed away from the wall and lurched toward the other end of the town, pausing every few rods to slap his companion's shoulder and to laugh.

The street was a busy one in front of a line of lighted buildings, frame, one-story shacks all; loud voices, coarse laughter, and the tinny sounds of a piano much out of tune blared into the darkness. Across from them was a small shack. It was dark, but its door was open and against the shadowy wall were two short, narrow streaks lighter than the background. To the tipsy puncher's roving eyes these streaks located the town marshal, and he pulled his new friend across the street and stopped in front of the man whose white shirt sleeves had revealed him in the dark.

"Toby," chuckled the puncher. "Meet m'friend Skinner, that wants——"

Toby Haines's swift movement told that he was now holding a rigid gun at his hip. He was leaning forward, peering at the face of this man Skinner, and he sighed with mingled relief and disappointment, and moved again, finding that he had a right hand to offer to the stranger.

"Milt's jest a damn fool," he explained. "Glad to meet you, Skinner."

Skinner relaxed, his own hand, forsaking walnut, moved out and took the marshal's.

"Same here," he said. "Reckon our mutual friend is a practical joker."

"I jest said as much," growled the officer. "He come near causin' a shootin'."

Milt grabbed both their shoulders for support while he laughed. "Wants to *buy* a cayuse, Toby! Bud'll reckon he's been plumb disgraced when he hears that. A Skinner *buyin'* a cayuse!"

"My fambly name don't seem to stand high in these diggin's," said Skinner, grinning.

"It stands so high it's worth a thousan' dollars if it's got 'Bud' on th' front end," retorted the marshal. "Related to him?"

"Not that I know of," answered Skinner. "My front name is Matt."

"C'mon, Matt," urged Milt, pulling at him. "Want to show you to th' boys. C'mon! So-long, Toby."

"You behave yoreself," warned the officer coldly. "Keep out of trouble."

Milt rocked back on his heels, poked the marshal in the ribs, and pointed to his friend Skinner.

"He jest got me out o' some. Knocked them two Silver Palace bouncers inter las' Christmus. Feel m'jaw, where they hit me!" He reached for the marshal's hand, missed it, and barely saved himself from going over. "Feel it," he insisted, holding out the swollen side of his face for the officer's inspection.

"Get out!" replied the marshal. "Go find yore friends, an' behave yoreself." He looked at Skinner. "If you want to buy a good cayuse, come 'round in th' mornin' an' we'll find one." He appeared to be a little curious.

"All right," replied Skinner, grabbing Milt's arm and

turning him around. "I'm tired settin' on a wagon. Bullwhackin' ain't no job for me. Where'll I find this fool's friends?"

"Try Cope's, middle of th' next block, acrost th' street."

Milt grabbed the officer's hand and pumped it energetically.

"S'long, Toby, ol' cow. If I come acrost any more Skinners I'll lug 'em over to you."

"Better do it in daylight, you bow-laigged tumblebug," chuckled the marshal. "G'wan now: find yore friends an' stay with 'em."

Cope's was in full blast. The first thing Skinner's eyes found and rested on was a lean individual who stood all of five feet one, but the face under the slicked black hair made him forget the diminutive figure of the man. Seamed and wrinkled until it appeared to have been alive for the last hundred years, out of it blazed a pair of eyes that sent little ripples up the stranger's back. As he looked, the little man squinted at Milt, the muscles of his face played and the wrinkles contorted. His forearm turned swiftly and with a rigid thumb he pointed to the far corner of the room, where four men were deep in a game of cards. Milt nodded, seemed to sober a little, and without a word led his friend toward the table indicated.

The quartet looked up, grinned, and pulled two chairs from another table, just as two Mexicans were about to sit down in them. It looked like the beginning of trouble, for the Mexicans had envious and well-earned reputations, something which must be upheld at all

costs; but a snapped word from Cope stopped the quarrel at black looks and the Mexicans found other chairs.

The quartet now turned its attention to their friend and his companion.

"Much obliged, stranger; you saved us bustin' up th' game," said a tall red-head.

"How much was it?" asked another, digging into his pocket. "We'll square it with you an' get it back in due course o' time."

Matt Skinner dropped on a chair and stared at them. "Meanin?"

"What did th' marshal skin you for?" asked the red-head.

"I'm too dumb to get yore drift," answered Matt, grinning because he couldn't help it.

The red-head glanced at Milt's swollen jaw. "You mean you didn't have to go his bail?"

Matt laughed and shook his head. "No; but he come near gettin' me shot."

"If he only come near it yo're lucky," chuckled another of the group. "I'm buyin' to celebrate th' only time in th' mem'ry of man that Milt ain't been throwed in th' *calaboẓo* when a-visitin' this here town." He let go a roar of laughter and stood up so the busy bartender could see him plainly. "Hey, Scotty! Bring five whiskies an' a glass o' lemon pop!"

"Set down!" snapped a voice, ringing like a plowshare tapped with a hammer, and they all looked up to see Cope standing near, his skinny arms folded across his narrow chest. The blazing eyes were fixed on Milt,

who shrunk under the stare. Then they turned to Matt Skinner. "You a stranger here?"

Matt took half a minute to reply, a cold antagonism permeating him.

"Y-e-a-h," he drawled in a voice like silk.

The smallest possible suggestion of a smile passed over the aged face of the proprietor, and he nodded.

"Make yoreself at home long's you stay. I do my own bouncin', when it's necessary, *regardless*." The smile flickered high for an instant and then died out, and the little man sauntered away, leaving Matt with the feeling that he had seen a deadly copperhead, a copperhead serene, unhurried, cold, and confident. He almost could smell the copperhead's warning odour.

Red-head let his breath go with a rush and scowled frankly at his friend Milt, who was sobering rapidly.

"Keep yore paws off'n that tray! Yo're drinkin' lemon pop, you Root-digger!"

"Aw, that ain't fit for a dawg," complained Milt, screwing up his face in frank disgust.

"Then stay thirsty!" snapped the red-head, lifting his glass. "Here's luck, all 'round," and he downed the drink in two gulps.

"If this is a sample o' my luck," growled Milt, spitting vehemently, "I ain't carin' how quick she changes! *Lemon pop!* Hell!" Suddenly a grin chased the scowl from his flushed face and he leaned over the table. "Hey, fellers! Here's a *Skinner* 'at wants to *buy* a cayuse!"

Late that night Matt left the cheerful crowd and sought a hotel, and when he awakened the next morning

it was late and he knew that the wagon train had been on its creaking way for hours. He dressed, had a leisurely breakfast, and then went to the office of the marshal to see about getting a mount.

The buying of a horse never is a simple affair with horsemen, and it strongly may be suspected that the principle expressed by the phrase *caveat emptor* had come down through the years from the first horse that changed owners in the dim long ago. It took two hours of shrewd examination and bargaining before Matthew Skinner led a bay gelding to the harness shop, where, under the friendly and interested eye of the town marshal, he selected a rim-fire saddle and the rest of the equipment necessary to turn a deserting teamster into a cowpuncher. After a Sharp's rifle had been purchased the several transactions were duly celebrated under the reptilian eyes of the weazened Mr. Cope, and then the reformed teamster shook hands all around and went on his casual way.

CHAPTER V

A THOUSAND DOLLARS LOST

FALL, winter, and spring had rolled past when Jed Hollister, alias Matthew Skinner, rode northward to demand an accounting of the boss of Griggs' Valley. Several letters, posted from various points in the Southwest, containing only crude sketches of a gibbet and a dangling hangman's noose, had preceded him during the months which had passed. He had intended to pass Vasquez without stopping, but when within a few miles of the town his horse had stepped into a hole and sprained its off foreleg. It was an injury that would only get worse, and he was forced to procure a remount.

He dropped into Cope's for a drink, and was surprised when the little proprietor called him by name. From there he went to the office of the marshal to enlist that person's aid in the purchase of another bay. The marshal also called him by name and enjoyed a mild joke about a Skinner who bought a horse. Matt got a magnificent animal, inquired about that puncher whom he knew as Milt, and found that he had been bailed out with monotonous regularity every time he had visited the town.

It was in the afternoon when Matt rode into the shallow arroyo intersecting the faint trail and glanced at

the hot ashes of a small fire. Not long since someone had roped, thrown, and tied a full-grown steer in this depression, and if the other signs were trustworthy they had branded it as well. Pony tracks led eastward up the bank of the arroyo; cow tracks, deep and so spaced that they told of panicky flight, went down the arroyo along its middle. They did not turn aside for brush or cacti, for the cow had smashed straight through. He pushed on about his business, but the thoughts of a cowman were in his head and it was second nature to keep a lookout for sight of the newly branded animal. The sun blazed down, a chaparral cock stepped saucily out on the trail ahead, stretched its powerful legs, and went rocking down the path, its defiant tail daring the horseman to a race.

"Go it alone, you runnin' fool," chuckled Matt, having no mind to exhaust his horse in a foolish pursuit. He watched the bobbing tail careen past scattered clumps of vegetation, flash into a quick, short circle, and then resume its former direction. Matt suddenly turned his horse toward the place of the road-runner's quick détour.

A wild-eyed steer was trying to make a circle of itself in its efforts to lick the inflamed iron marks, but as it became aware of the horseman it straightened with a snap and ran off at the speed of a range-bred animal.

"Left ear notched, an' an old cut," muttered Matt. "Ain't never had an iron on it till to-day. Hump!"

He turned back and resumed his course, arguing with himself. It was a clash between the individual and the class. As an individual this was none of his business;

as a cowman it was his business. As an individual he should keep his nose out of things which did not concern him; as a cowman it concerned him a great deal.

"Pete," he said, drawing rein, "what'll we do about this?"

Pete pushed his head forward, obtained the desired slack in the reins, and went on again. The faint scent of water made him expand his nostrils. While he was a cow horse, he also was a strong individualist and gave small heed to the ethics of the mass when he wanted a drink. He never had known any good to come from meddling. The velvety muzzle played sensitively and he swung into a lope.

His rider let him go, but chided him. "Pete, yo're selfish. I'm ashamed of you. You ain't no thirstier than I am."

Pete looked at the waiting chaparral cock, whose actions were insulting to a horse of pride and mettle, and forthwith changed his stride. Matt glanced from the horse to the road-runner, grinned, and leaned forward; and Pete split the air like a living arrow; but there was another living arrow two hundred yards ahead of him, also splitting the air, and for the next hour that six hundred feet remained constant. There came a gleam of water and the horse swerved aside. The road-runner slowed up, stopped, and waited. The horse kept on at the new angle and the bird, feeling that this abortive race was over, flicked its defiant tail and stepped into the chaparral to replenish its fuel. Here was what had promised to be a good race, finished after a mere dozen miles or so, just when he was getting warmed up. He

pecked at a baby lizard, which darted from one cover to another, missed the delectable tail, and preened his feathers. Ho-hum! How commonplace life was, after all!

Pete stood in the stream, water spilling from his mouth as he raised his head and looked around at his new master, who as yet had used neither spur nor quirt. The quirt hung to the saddle and he could not see the spurs because of the flaring stirrup leathers. Suddenly he stood up on his hind legs, felt the quick shift of the rider to meet this scandalous change and the rub of spurless heels along his flank.

Matt spoke quietly, and as the horse dropped to all-fours again and nosed the water, the rider laughed.

"I don't mind you chasin' road-runners when they run th' way we're headin', but you needn't get th' notion you can chase flyin' birds."

Pete shook his silky skin and turned, reluctant to leave the water, snorted, and moved sidewise at a flowing movement in a thicket. He pranced a little despite the reassurance of his rider, who suddenly wondered how the bay would respond to a pistol shot near his head. This was a good time to gain some important knowledge. The Colt sent a cloud of smoke rolling toward the writhing snake. Pete stiffened, relaxed, and stepped in high disdain toward the trail. Here was a man who wore no spurs, used no quirt, let him race when he felt insulted, and shot snakes that startled him. Of his own volition he settled himself into a distance-eating lope.

"Pete," said Matt in a voice a mother might use to her first-born, "I'm goin' to like you a heap."

Twilight was creeping close to the ground, merging the outlines of the vegetation into the graying monotone of the plain, and all shadows long since had run together into common effacement. On the southern slope of a ridge a square adobe, squat under the burden of its roof, sent a tenuous streamer of wood smoke straight up into the hushed air. Matt's sidewise glance caught the building and he swung toward it. Pete pricked up his ears, stretched his neck, and went toward the rickety corral like soft iron toward a magnet.

The door of the house was open to the reflected light in the sky, which gave illumination enough to let Matt see the quick movement of three figures through the grimy glass of the end window. The group of three he first had seen had split up and its units disappeared; and when he swung off his horse and knocked, the one room seemed to be deserted.

"Come in," said a harsh voice, and Matt obeyed.

In three of the four corners sat a man, each leaning back in a chair, each puffing a cigarette, and each cigarette had been freshly rolled. In the centre of the room, against a table, stood a fourth chair. Beside it was a hot stove. To sit here was to have at least one of the men behind him. He remembered the newly branded steer, the hasty movement of the group. Each of his companions showed a queer liking for a corner, and the three cigarettes had been freshly rolled. The atmosphere was strained and unnatural, loaded with suspicion and veiled hostility. He swung his head in a circling nod, stepped toward the vacant chair, and paused as he held out his hand to estimate the heat of

the stove. Frowning, he dragged the chair to the one unoccupied corner.

"Hot, ain't it?" he asked, pleasantly, shoving out his legs.

Three heads bobbed in unison, and the nearest man yawned and spoke.

"Had supper?" he asked.

Matt shook his head. "No; I kept on, hopin' I'd run acrost a house. They're scarce out this way. If I'm too late I can dig up somethin' from my slicker roll. Ate yet?"

"Jest finished," answered a man whose left hand was minus its thumb. "There's chuck on th' table, if it ain't too cold. Ridin' long?"

Matt dragged his chair along the wall and up to the table. This was not as good as the corner, but better than next to the stove.

"'Most all day," he answered, attacking the beans. When he had finished he frowned slightly at the stove on the other side of the table, dragged the chair back into the corner, and loaded his pipe.

"Reckon I'll have to keep ridin'," he observed. "I'm lookin' for a job, but there don't seem to be no ranches hereabouts. Gosh!" he said, chiding himself. "I forgot my cayuse."

The pockmarked man in the far corner lazily arose. "C'mon. I'll give you a hand. *I* ain't washin' no dishes to-night."

"Hell you ain't!" snapped the third man, his voice edged.

"Hell I am!"

"Easy, Bud!" said the second. "We'll cut for it."

"Count me in," offered Matt.

"Count me out!" rejoined Bud, his crooked mouth wreathed in a sneer. "Stump ain't washed no dishes for a week. He'll wash 'em to-night!"

"Suits me," replied Stump. "I bust so many I hate to start." He glanced at his crippled left hand. "But I'd rather bust 'em than wrangle. Go ahead, an' we'll have a game when you come back. How do folks call you, stranger?"

"Matt Skinner."

The man called Bud whirled in the door, looking at the guest through half-closed lids. "Meanin'?" he growled.

Matt looked at him with the bland innocence of a Chinaman. "Meanin' what?" he asked.

"Where you from?" demanded Bud, his eyes gleaming.

"Rincon Valley."

"Naw! I mean yore folks!"

"Arkinsaw; why?"

"Any relation of Calhoun Skinner?"

Matt secretly cursed himself. With the whole United States to pick from he had chosen the wrong state.

"Never heard of him," he answered. "I run away when I was a kid, an' never went back."

Bud glanced at the brand on the bay horse and seemed to tense a little. "Raise them kind of cayuses over in Rincon Valley?" he asked, admiringly, but his squinting lids did not entirely hide the gleam in his eyes.

Matt laughed. "Don't believe they ever saw a

cayuse like that. I got him at Vasquez, of a friend of th' marshal." He saw Bud's eyes leave his own to glance over his shoulder and then flash back again. "I never owned a nicer."

"Know th' marshal?"

"No; but that reminds me. He lost a thousan' dollars jest before I talked to him. Reckon he figgered I took it at first; but when he got a good look at me he calmed down fast." Matt rubbed his chin. "Ain't he jest a mite *loco?*"

Stump laughed. He was standing on the balls of his feet, his hands on his hips. "Some says he is; some says he ain't. It's a toss-up. Why?"

"I was drinkin' with some fellers an' th' first thing I knowed I felt a gun ag'in my back. When I got my hands up I turned cautious an' saw it was th' marshal. When he seen my face he swore somethin' about losin' a thousan' dollars an' went tearin' out ag'in, everybody laughin' but me. When I asked 'em about it they only shook their heads an' looked sad. Damn it, they shouldn't let a man like him run loose, let alone makin' him marshal!"

His companions were grinning and Bud stepped back into the room.

"Never knowed he had a thousan' dollars to lose," he said. "Take yore cayuse through th' corral into th' pasture behind it. I'm helpin' Stump wash th' dishes to-night."

Matt looked curiously from one to the other, grinned foolishly, and went toward his horse, his mind racing like a prairie fire fanned by its own wind. On his person

was the same small fortune obtained for his Griggs' Valley ranch. The reserve funds were in two rolls and in large bills. He flipped up the reins with a careless gesture, pushed his hands into his pockets and, one arm through the reins, led the bay toward the little corral. Bud Skinner popularly was supposed never to have bought a horse. Matt's eyes missed nothing about him as he walked slowly on.

Behind the wall of the corral and stacked against it was a pile of tin cans and miscellaneous junk useless for firewood. The reins slipped down his arm and he flipped them up again, one of them whipping over the pommel of the saddle. He chuckled to himself: if he had been possessed of any sense he would not have risked horning into a bar-room brawl in which he had no interest; and if he had not horned into it and become acquainted with the man Milt he now would be in a fair way to lose eight thousand dollars, or be faced with a desperate fight in the dark against odds—if he wasn't killed while he slept. Bud Skinner never had been known to buy a horse.

Matt entered the corral, pulled quickly on one of the reins, and his horse suddenly pushed him sidewise against the palings and the ragged edges of some cans which projected through the openings. Here was a cache for the money! For a moment the horse bulked squarely between its master and the adobe house, and then wildly threw up its head as the cursing man struck at it to cover the movement of his other hand flashing toward a can; then he leaped to keep from being crushed against the posts.

"Where you reckon yo're goin'?" shouted Matt, yanking savagely at the high-flung head and striking again, and again missing. "Quit that damned side-windin'!"

The horse was pressing against the stockade, and its owner fairly dragged it to the pasture gate, threw down the bars, pulled the animal through, and then slammed the poles back into place.

"I'll bust you of side-windin', or—Good Lord! I ain't got th' saddle off!"

After a short session of dishwashing a poker game got under way, and when it ended Matt had lost two gold pieces, a few crumpled bills, and a handful of silver. He turned his pockets inside out and arose.

"Now I got to get a job," he grumbled sleepily, and opened his blanket roll, spread the blanket before the door to get what breezes might stir, and crawled into it. His clothes lay on a chair close by, the sheathed Colt on top of them. In a few minutes the light was blown out and good-nights were exchanged.

He had no idea of the hour when he awakened to feel hands going gently over him. He did not stir, and managed to keep breathing at the same slow rhythm. The hands desisted, and he heard the rustling of a bunk. Wide awake now, his eyelids slightly parted, he lay for a long time without moving. The breathing of the three men had become soft and regular, and he reached out a hand to let his fingers slip along the holster. It now lay some inches from the edge of the trouser pocket he had lined it up with. Himself and his belongings had been thoroughly searched. Letting himself down

into the blanket he waited awhile and then silently rolled to the door, removed his socks and slipped to the corral, walking on grass wherever possible. In a few moments he was back again, drew on the socks to hide the dust on the soles of his feet, slipped the packages of bills in the pockets of the slicker and lay down again. Dawn awakened him and he sat up, grumbling. A bunk creaked and Bud asked a question, a metallic clicking punctuating it.

"It's me," answered the guest. "Snooze till I get th' fire goin'. I'm aimin' to cook th' breakfast."

At the conclusion of the meal Matt pushed back, packed his pipe, and beamed with smug satisfaction.

"Where'll I ride to get a job?" he asked.

Bud dipped a finger in the warming dishwater, swore luridly, wiped it on a sleeve and answered after a moment's thought:

"Over east, a day's ride," he said.

"Uh-huh," acquiesced Matt, lazily arising. "I'll give you a hand with th' dishes an' then pull my stake."

"Don't bother," growled Bud. "Stump's goin' to do 'em."

Stump growled, but began the task.

"All right," said Matt. "Much obliged for puttin' me up." He rolled the blanket in the slicker, picked up his saddle, bridle, and rifle, and after a moment's juggling carried them toward the pasture. He was wondering if they would try to take his horse, and his face hardened. He dropped the bridle when near the corral and turned around to pick it up. Bud was leaning in the door looking across the country, Stump was washing

dishes, but the third man, peering out of the window, darted back.

Pete acted suspicious because of the treatment accorded him the evening before, and Matt swore. He had been forced to give the animal an impression which might take time to efface, and his anger against those responsible for it grew swiftly. Did he need another thousand dollars bad enough to accept blood money? He was turning this over in his mind when he rode from the corral and raised his hand in departing salutation to the man in the door. Bud grinned and waved a careless hand, unknowingly saving himself trials and tribulations by the spontaneous civility of the gesture. Matt decided he could do without the thousand.

He was anxious to get away before any of his companions discovered the tracks of his bare feet to and from the pile of débris at the corral and he rounded the palisade and headed eastward, notwithstanding that he knew no ranches would be found on that desert-like stretch of country. He spoke to Pete, and the animal shifted into its favourite lope, rocking over the ground with smooth and tireless stride. Well out of sight of the house, Matt turned south through every draw that was passable. After an hour's riding he drew up, left the horse at the bottom of an arroyo, and crept up the bank until his hatless head came even with the rim. A mile behind him and coming hard was a familiar figure, the man who had darted back from the window when Matt had picked up the bridle.

Sliding to the bottom of the ravine, Matt ran back a hundred yards. He pushed into a tangle of brush, lis-

tening for hoofbeats to ring out over a rocky stretch just beyond. Soon he heard them, and they were being made by a walking horse. This in itself would have been suspicious, but when the softer beats of a racing animal crossing turf came to him it was conclusive.

Bud's companion hove into sight, his eyes darting from the trail ahead to the brush on both sides of the arroyo, and as he neared another stretch of hard earth he slowed again. A rifle was held somewhat aloft in his right hand, and he appeared to be eager and anxious.

Matt waited until the pursuer was barely past him and then stepped out, his gun levelled, and called a halt. The other stopped, and swung in the saddle like a flash, the rifle dropping like a striking hawk. Matt's shot struck the rusted side-plate and drove it in, at the same time deflecting the weapon.

"Drop it!" snapped Matt. "Hands up!"

"What you reckon yo're doin'?" blazed the horseman.

"Higher!" ordered Matt, walking forward. He took the Colt from its sheath and shoved it into his own holster. "Git off."

"Turned road-agent, huh?" sneered the other, obeying. "Fine way to treat them that fed you!"

"An' searched me while I slept," countered Matt, picking up the rifle. One glance and he threw it away, for its usefulness had departed. "You never can tell what's goin' to happen when you foller a barefoot trail. Turn around an' start back."

"Hoss-thief, too, huh?" growled the other.

"I'm leadin' yore cayuse a ways. You'll find him about five mile farther on. You'd 'a' done better if you'd told th' others an' brought 'em with you, 'stead of hoggin' it yoreself. It won't do you no good to chase me now. Pete can run rings around th' runts you fellers ride, it'll take you three hours to get home again, an' by that time I'll be out of reach. *Vamoose!*"

Cursing in suppressed rage the dismounted outlaw swaggered to the side of the ravine and started to climb.

"Stay down here!" ordered Matt. "Think I'm chancin' you beatin' me to Pete an' my rifle? Hit th' trail!"

Matt swung into the saddle and followed the furious man for a few hundred yards and then galloped back to his own horse and in a moment more was riding on his way. When he came to the end of the arroyo he turned west, for Bud Skinner, who never had bought a horse and who had searched his clothes, had told him to go eastward. This was reason enough to go west. His life had been full of decisions made on reasons poorer than this one, for all his life he had acted on certain "feelin's." He was not educated enough to give these "feelin's" their proper terms and relations. He did not realize that his powers of observation were remarkably developed and that a wealth of details which escaped his cognizance nevertheless formed a mass of data on which his subconscious mind made deductions and acted without hesitation. An unobserving observer would have called Matt Skinner a creature of moods and whims, and done him an honest injustice. So now he rode west, worrying about how

he could regain the unsuspicious regard of his horse. Pete, having only the limited intelligence of his species, had to take things on their face value; and not soon would he forget the two angry and uncalled-for blows that had missed his head the evening before.

CHAPTER VI

FAMILIAR NAMES

THE encircling hills drew in, and with every mile Matt found them more and more restricting his choice of direction. The valley narrowed and was crisscrossed with washes, while wandering down the bottom was the creek bed, now a chain of pools. The creek was mercurial: either it was a roaring, turgid flood, or an apology. Mile after mile of rocky mountainsides formed the upper end of the valley above the gorge, the steep rock shedding rain like a shingled roof. In the gorge itself, which he had not yet reached, a water mark lay along the walls thirty feet above its bottom. The mud-coloured streaks across the smooth face of the rock at a distance gave the walls a striped appearance, a feature so outstanding that its name was derived therefrom: Striped Canyon. Any time after the moderate snowfall on the mountains had melted and the spring rains had ceased, the trail through the canyon was the shortest way from the upper valley; but any heavy rain above the gorge turned it into a raging fury within an hour.

Matt pushed into it, admiring the stripe effect; and involuntarily glanced up at the ribbon of sky, and

slouched back again when he saw it was blue and clear. He had been riding for some time along the trail, winding among the bowlders and scrambling over piles of rock, when he rounded a sudden turn and pulled up to gaze upon the sight before him.

Five great canyons, all with sloping sides, converged into this great basin among the hills; between the great canyons numbers of smaller ones gashed the slopes, and from the almost bare surface of the upper levels, down to the thick grass on the plain, the trees increased from a few stragglers to solid phalanxes which clothed the bases of the hills: the massed effect was positive from a distance, but he was to learn that in reality the tree growth was sparse. Before him the bed of the creek had a width and a depth approaching the dignity of a large river, which saved the grass lands from the ravages of all but the greater floods.

He spoke to Pete and moved on. A few yards brought into sight a composite building having two wings, one of adobe and one of hewn logs, attached to a flat cubicle of stone. It sprawled across a bench on the hillside, and behind it was a wagon-shed open to the south, a flimsy shack with a home-made forge and cowhide bellows. There was a discoloured haystack, a fenced-in spring, and a corral whose walls were of uncemented rocks. In this were several horses, more than half of them showing pack sores.

While he gazed, a procession issued from the door of the dwelling and became a frankly curious group, in which three generations favoured him with deliberate and searching scrutiny. He rode toward the slatternly

group, noting the stains of tobacco on the faces of all but the younger woman. The grandfather carried a snuff stick over his ear, his dirty beard was streaked with brown, and he hitched up his belt with a peculiar and characteristic motion. The second generation, father and mother of the third, Matt decided, were no less unprepossessing, and both habitually made use of tobacco in three ways. The two grown sons were as bad as their elders, but the daughter stood apart in both meanings of the phrase. She showed no signs of tobacco, her hair was brushed and neatly piled on the back of her head, her face and neck were clean, and clean and neat was her calico dress.

"Fine day," said Matt, pulling up.

"Hey?" asked the old man, turning his good ear to the visitor. The others, with the exception of the younger woman, leered at him suspiciously and remained silent; the exception smiled.

Matt ignored the rest of the group and returned her smile.

"Mebby you'll tell a stranger if there are any ranches 'round here where I can get a job?"

"Ranger!" exclaimed the grandfather, his face working. "*Ranger?*"

"Naw; stranger," replied the son, turning toward Matt again. "I'll do th' talkin' for th' fambly! What ye want, 'round yere?" His voice crackled with hostility and suspicion.

Matt looked him in the eyes for full half a minute, but the other glanced away nervously.

"I don't want nothin' from you," sneered Matt.

"Are there any ranches hereabouts where a man can get a job?"

"Seein' yo're so damned smart, find out fer yerself!" snapped the other.

"I reckon ye know more about this yere country than we does!" said the older woman, sniffling sharply.

"Shet yer mouth, an' git inside!" snapped her spouse, pushing her toward the door. "All of ye git in thar!" he ordered. He glared at the horseman, who was grinning at this tempest. "Ef ye asks a civil question ye gits a civil answer!"

Matt laughed. "Wipe off yore chin: it's floodin' with juice."

"'Tain't yer chin!"

"Yo're right. You don't mix loco weed with yore tobacco, do you?"

The man on the ground became aware that one member of his family had ignored his order to enter the house, and he wheeled on her with an oath.

"Git in thar!" he shouted, raising his arm. "I'll larn ye to mind yer elders!" He took a step toward her, but the rider's words made him wheel.

"Dirty Face," called Matt. "You ain't answered my question: any ranches near here where I can get a job?"

A smile showed on the girl's face, and as she turned to go toward the house she nodded her head slightly toward the right-hand canyon at the upper end of the valley.

"You git!" shouted her father, glaring at Matt. "You git afore we whang ye off'n that hoss! Ye can't come 'round yere 'sultin' folks without losin' some o'

yer hide an' ha'r! Ef I war shore of what I'm suspicionin' we'd larn ye not to poke yer nose in things as don't consarn ye! Git out, afore I tell 'em to loose on ye!"

"Must be *all* loco weed," said Matt, smiling. "See you some other day, an' wipe off yore chin for you. *Adios.*"

The man on the ground, crouched and tense, stared after the loping horseman, his hand stealing inside his shirt; for a moment he hung in the balance, and then loosed his hold on the weapon and stood erect.

"Wipin' chins is a game *two* kin play at, damn yer soul!" he shouted.

"Which makes it a game," retorted Matt, choosing the right-hand trail.

It was mid-afternoon when he reached the top of the divide and saw the plain lying beyond it. So far from him that they looked like dice were a group of buildings in the middle of a fine cattle range. He rested his horse for a few minutes and then pushed down the slope.

The nearer he got to the Hundred-Eleven ranch buildings the better he liked them. There was nothing slip-shod here, for all was order and neatness. The T-shaped adobe ranchhouse lay between small but well-kept flower beds; the path leading to the covered well had been newly swept, and those going toward the corrals and bunkhouse were free from débris. The gallery leading from the ranchhouse to the summer kitchen was far from being the customary catch-all of riding gear and general miscellany. A saddle rail lay parallel with the inner face of the one wall, and wooden pegs held

bridles and other paraphernalia. Pride and energy dwelt here, and he felt that he knew how the ranch was run.

Pete swerved toward a horse trough near the rear of the building and plunged his muzzle into the sun-warmed water with only a passing glance at a saddled horse standing at the hitch rack near by. Matt swung from the saddle and after a moment patted the silky shoulder and led Pete to the tie rail, tied a deft knot in the reins, and turned to wander lazily toward the house; but as he did so he heard voices pitched high in vexation and anger. He backed to the rail, swung himself upon it, and waited for a more propitious moment to make known his wants.

"But I say I *saw* you!" snapped a man's voice.

"It makes no difference to me what you say you saw!" came a warm retort in a woman's voice.

Matt's frown of disapproval at the sound of the first voice faded at the sound of the second. There was in it a throaty richness and a ringing tone that made him cock his head. He thought he could listen to that voice a long time without tiring; it seemed to do things to his blood, to speed his circulation. If it was so sweet when its possessor was angry, what must it be when her mood was pleasant? What must it be when she was speaking softly, as she would——? He grunted at his impertinent thought, and glanced sidewise at Pete; but Pete was no mind reader, and he was strongly disapproving of the horse on the other side of the rail, as evidenced by the flatness of his ears.

"It does make a difference!" rejoined the man, his

tones growing harsher. "It makes so much difference that I won't stand——"

"It makes none whatever!" retorted the woman. "I am not accountable to any one for my actions. I dance with whom I please, and you might as well realize that, right now. I will not be put on the defensive—not *yet*, anyhow."

"Dance!" sneered her companion, laughing bitterly. "Dance! You can dance with the devil himself if you wish! I'm not talking about dancing! *I'm* talking about *kissing!* Yes: that's the word: *kissing!*"

"I refuse to be insulted!" cried the woman. "I can stand a certain amount of jealousy, but when it makes a man lie it goes too far!"

"I'm not lying!" he shouted. "I *saw* you kiss him! You can't deny it!"

Matt squirmed and glanced again at Pete, who at that moment closed his snapping teeth a fraction of an inch from the flinching muzzle of the other horse. Matt wondered if Pete meant it as a cue, but swayed in hesitation: lovers' quarrels were uncertain things to horn into.

"I shall not take the trouble to deny it!" The voice was very throaty now, and there could be no doubt about the ringing tones. "Don't call again, Mr. Howard!"

"By God, you can't throw me over like that!" rasped the man's voice. "It's gone too far for you to toss me——"

"Your stupid jealousy and beastly temper are to blame!" she snapped. "I mean what I say!"

A door slammed, there came sounds of hammering fists and kicking feet against solid oak, and then, with a shouted curse and threat, a man dashed around the corner of the house on a sprint for the rear door.

"A-hem!" coughed Matt, as a horse squealed. He felt the rail sway suddenly under him and managed to land on his feet as Pete broke the reins and whirled to kick his equine enemy.

The running man stopped and turned, his face dark with rage.

"If you don't get yore cayuse away, my Pete'll turn him into crow-bait," suggested Matt.

"Who the hell are you, and what you want?" barked the other.

"I'm Wee Willie Winkles, an' th' rest ain't none of yore business," answered Matt. He smiled blandly. "Strikes me, though, that I'm just ridin' *up*, as yo're ridin' *off*."

"*Oh!*" sneered Howard, blind with anger. "*That's* how it strikes you, huh? You ride off damned quick or somethin' *else* will strike you!"

Matt sighed. "Somethin's wrong with me," he confessed. "Everywhere I go I run into trouble. Well, a *little* more won't make no difference. I'm tellin' you to get yore cayuse away before Pete makes jelly of him. *Pete!*" he shouted. "You stop that! You'll skin yore laigs, kickin' that rail! 'Scuse me, till I get hold of him."

With the broken reins in his hand he turned to face Cal Howard, stroking the nervous horse while he talked to it.

Howard had whirled toward the rear door, hesitated, and spun around, and saw Matt take a hand from the butt of the Colt. He glared and wet his lips.

"Gun-play, eh?" he sneered in a voice shaky and thick with unreasoning rage.

Matt shook his head. "Only in case I couldn't beat you to th' door," he explained. "Long's you keep away from it there won't be none."

"Unless I start toward you!" snapped Howard, walking toward the quiet puncher.

Again Matt shook his head. "Nope: an' you can start as soon as you want."

Howard snapped a puff of dust from a trouser leg with a sharp blow of his quirt, raised the whip as if to slap again, and leaped forward like a shot, the braided leather cutting down. He was in the middle of the jump when Matt bent sidewise, raised a stiff leg and let the aggressor ram against his foot. The shock threw them both to the ground, but Matt had more breath than the other and scrambled to him. He tore the quirt loose, threw it away, and reclined on his side close to Howard, one elbow propped on the ground and his chin in the upraised hand. Howard started to sit up, but Matt reached over with his other hand and slammed him back again. Again Howard tried to rise, and again he was slammed back. He writhed and gripped his amazing enemy with hands, arms, and legs, found himself underneath and his head rhythmically pounding the hard earth. He tried for a throat grip and then fairly whistled from pain. The heel of his adversary's hand pressed his nose upward and back, and tears sprang into

his eyes. As he reached to tear the torturing hand away, Matt moved swiftly and came down with a slam, sitting on Howard's chest, his knees even with the other's ears and pressing the aching head between them. Howard tried to squirm out but increased pressure against his nose paralyzed him. He relaxed, and the pressure eased, and suddenly the puncher leaped up and stood grinning at him.

"Sometimes I get rougher'n I think," he said. "Wipe off yore face: it's all bloody. You got a tender nose."

Howard slowly arose and as he felt his feet beneath him he leaped from a crouch, a driving fist showing him the way. Matt writhed sidewise, let the fist pass under his arm, and clamped his own left arm down on the other's right. They came together like two fighting bulls, but Matt's hand again found the tender nose as his heel slipped behind Howard's. He bent his back and pushed as he suddenly released the imprisoned arm. Then he again grinned down at his enemy, whose sense of location was vastly confused.

There came a squeal from behind him and he whirled to see Pete bunching himself for another kick. "Pete!" he shouted, dashing toward the pugnacious animal. The double blow sounded like a padded maul against an empty barrel, and Pete gathered himself once more. Matt drove the weight of his hurtling body against the upraised rump. Delicately balanced for an instant on his two front legs Pete was caught foul, and as his hind legs shot out he was knocked on his side. Matt grabbed him as he scrambled up, and led him back to the tie rail,

where quick work with the end of the lariat cut down his radius of action. Then Matt climbed on the rail and watched Howard gain his feet and make a complete circle before he got his bearings.

Matt laughed. "This way, stranger. Here's yore cayuse. You both better *vamoose* before me an' Pete lose our valuable tempers."

Howard wabbled to his horse, scrambled into the saddle and tried to ride off without untying the reins from the rail.

"Set still," said Matt. He slid along the rail and loosened the knot, flinging the reins over the horse's head. "All right: yo're loose."

"I'll collect payment for this!" whispered Howard, whirling away. He flashed past the corral and drove a spur solidly into the sore side of his mount. Nothing further was needed to obtain speed, and he streaked across the flat pasture like a frightened coyote.

Matt shook his head, tied the broken reins together, and jumped into the saddle. For a moment his eyes rested on a curtained window and he thought he could make out an oval face drawing back from the dotted Swiss. On a gamble he raised his sombrero, and turned to ride to the bunkhouse, not a hundred yards away.

The interior of the house was cool and clean and he sat down on a chair near the door, loading his pipe. Pete pawed restlessly and swung around in a circle, the pivot being the hanging reins. Having gone around twice, he backed cautiously from the dangling leathers and felt his way to the door, which he blocked completely as he stopped there and pawed again.

"Yo're a fraud; an' you want more fussin' than a new baby," accused Matt. "You got bad manners, too: th' manners of a frontier rowdy, pickin' on that cayuse like you did. You oughta be ashamed!" He pushed the animal out of the door, led it off and stripped the riding gear from it. Pete nickered, kicked up his heels, and trotted toward the horse pond and the grass beyond. "I told you," said Matt. "Yo're allus thinkin' of eatin' an' drinkin'—which reminds *me!* Wonder if th' cook is in his shack?"

The cook was not in the shack, but was asleep in the shadows along the outside wall. Matt looked at him and then into the kitchen. He tip-toed in, quenched his thirst, took some matches, and went out again to wait for the cook to awaken. To aid him in this yearned-for action Matt fixed his eyes on the cook's back, between the shoulder blades, and stared steadily. The minutes dragged and nothing happened. Perhaps it would not work with a sleeping man. A horned toad hopped around the side of the house and stopped short within a yard of the cook's head. It did not know that the gentleman sitting on the box was hungry.

At the roaring explosion the cook seemed endowed with springs, for he went straight up into the air without changing his horizontal plane. He turned like a cat as he started down, landing on hands and knees, crouched to spring.

"You'd 'a' got warts if it wasn't for me," explained Matt, shoving the smoking gun into its holster. "Looka there," he said proudly, pointing.

The groping cook of the Hundred-Eleven outfit

looked, beheld a mass of twitching flesh and a fair-sized hole in the sand. He looked back at the stranger and blinked.

"What you say?" he demanded.

"Them's pizen where I come from," assured Matt soberly. "It was fixin' to hop on yore face when I blowed it up."

There was not enough left of the toad to tell, with any exactitude, just what it had been, but the cook was argumentative by nature.

"That—that—toad?" he hazarded. "Pizen? So's a chickadee!"

"Where I come from they're pizen," said Matt, positively. "Friend of mine lost his arm from bein' bit by one of 'em."

"They must be *big*, as well as pizen, where you come from," countered the cook with vast skepticism. "Bit off that arm with one snap of his powerful jaws, I betcha," he jibed.

Matt packed his pipe, frowning at such levity. "You misunderstood me. Th' arm swelled an' had to be cut off to save his life. He couldn't eat nothin', an' —— By th' way: what time is grub-pile 'round here?"

"Be a hour yet," said the cook, pushing the remains of the toad against the wall with a discreet foot. "Hungry?"

"Since near breakfast," admitted Matt.

"I can rustle you a snack in a minute, only it won't be hot."

"I'll warm it as it goes down," replied Matt, grinning.

While he was warming the food after his own fashion

the cook watched him with admiration and finally voiced his thoughts.

"I shore do admire to see a man eat hearty," he said. "There's another bowl of them beans on th' shelf; but you'll mebby lose yore appetite for supper."

Matt half arose, reached up, and brought down the second bowl of beans. "Losin' my appetite ain't never bothered me," he reassured the admiring cook as he started on the second portion. "I'll take off th' edge, an' finish with th' boys when they set down."

"You ain't aimin' to stop here, are you?" asked the cook after a moment's intense thought.

Matt grunted in the affirmative, in a flash making up his mind to stay awhile in this interesting country. William Glenn could wait.

"Shore am, if I can get a job. I'm out of spendin' money—an' I got to eat." He scowled darkly. "Fellers I spent a night with went through my clothes while I slept. Foreman need a new hand?"

The cook, looking out of the window, jerked a thumb toward the ranchhouse. "He's just rid in with th' Ol' Man. He'll tell you quick enough, one way or t'other."

Matt arose, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and stepped to the door. "Much obliged: see you in a few minutes," and he was gone.

When he stopped he was within a few yards of the foreman and the owner of the ranch, who paused in their conversation to look at him.

"Well, stranger?" said the foreman.

"I'm hopin' you can use another puncher," explained Matt, smiling.

The two men exchanged glances.

"There's a man now, to take Long Jack's place," said the owner. "He'll last longer, perhaps."

"Where you from?" asked the foreman. "What's yore name?"

Matt told him and answered other questions, rebuffing a vague distrust for this foreman.

"That's no name for a man to have who wants a job on *this* ranch!" growled the foreman. "Skinner! Don't like it a-tall!"

"If he had any reason to hide it he wouldn't have given it," said the owner, studying the whimsical face before him. "Why not give him a trial, Chet?"

"Skinner, you gun-shy?" asked the foreman.

"No more'n th' average," chuckled Matt. "I've seen some as was shyer."

"Do you know Bud Skinner?"

"Slept with a feller last night that I suspicioned was him from th' way he acted."

"What? Slept with a fellow you reckoned was Bud Skinner?"

"Well, I slept when I wasn't layin' awake watchin'."

"What did he look like?"

Matt told him with painstaking details, and described the other two.

"Chet, here's th' very man for Long Jack's trick," said the owner with emphasis. "He knows th' other two by sight!"

"Also sound," added Matt, thoughtfully, wondering why he felt so antagonistic to the foreman. "They

went through my clothes while I watched 'em. It was Bud that did that."

"You let 'em rob you?" snorted the foreman.

"There wasn't nothin' worth takin'," chuckled Matt, "'cept a gold ring that they didn't take. I'd cached my roll when I put up my cayuse. When I told him my name was Skinner, an' he whirled like he did, I got suspicious."

"We was losin' cattle over east," said the foreman. "It's been stopped a long time, though. Long Jack had that line, but he was scared off. That's th' only place we got for you."

"A man with a hungry gut can't pick an' choose," grumbled Matt. "Tell me what I oughta know, so I won't make a fool of myself th' very first thing."

"Milt will tell you," replied the foreman, looking at the brand on the grazing Pete. "You'll live in th' line house with him. Did you buy that cayuse from th' marshal of Vasquez, Toby Haines?"

"That's th' second cayuse he helped me pick out," Matt answered. A sudden thought made him smile. "Is this line rider th' same Milt that hangs out in Cope's?"

"Yes," answered the foreman. "Reckon you'll do, Skinner, till you get shot, or run off."

Matt's eyes hardened and his face set. What had he seen in the foreman's eyes? "Yeah," he replied, adjusting his belt.

"We're payin' sixty an' found," said the foreman. "You get an extra ten while yo're on th' east line."

"That's good pay," replied Matt, and he turned away whistling softly.

The cook was busy, which Matt tacitly recognized by dragging the box near the door. He filled his pipe and let his eyes stray carelessly over the loaded shelves, his gaze returning to an empty glass jar which had a screw top and a rubber washer under it.

"I got a job," he observed.

"You'll find Glenn a good boss, an' Taggart knows cattle from A to Izzard," replied the busy cook.

Matt's gaze left the jar and settled on a point on the horizon.

"Who'd you say?"

"Rand Glenn—Randall Glenn—is th' Ol' Man; Chet Taggart's th' foreman. There's more Glenns, too: Milt an' Miss Agnes. What name you wearin' 'round here?"

Matt considered another matter. That other Glenn had a son, who was drowned. He had a daughter, too, who did not come home any more. Strange coincidence —or was it strange? He would have to learn more about these two later on. He realized the cook's question, which he now answered.

"Matt Skinner. Don't say it: I heard it all before. I'm takin' Long Jack's place, pairin' up with Milt. I met Milt before."

"He's all right," said the cook. "Still sowin' a few oats, but he's all right. All th' Glenns are all right. Th' Ol' Man's a hummer, an' bein' eddicated back East didn't spoil Miss Agnes none. She's engaged to a lawyer over in Los Altos."

"Yeah," grunted Matt. "What's th' name of that shiftless fambly at that striped canyon over east?"

"Them's th' Peabodys. They're farmin' a little, an' raisin' a few head. Know 'em?"

"Just looked at 'em comin' past," answered Matt. "Betcha they come from Texas, leastwise th' ol' man did; for he was worried about Texas rangers."

"Don't know; there ain't much knowed about 'em. What makes you reckon they come from Texas?"

Matt looked at the horizon again. "Just guessed it. Is there a feller named Howard livin' hereabouts?"

"Shore; he's th' lawyer I was speakin' about. Great friend of th' foreman's," answered the cook, jabbing a fork into a potato.

Picking up some dishes the cook turned toward the door leading into the bunkroom as Matt arose to get a drink from the water barrel. With the sound of the dishes being placed on the dining table Matt reached up for the empty jar and went back to his box with it. He placed it behind the seat and crossed his legs. The cook hurried back to the stove, his attention on the sputtering frying pan.

"When's Milt ridin' in?" asked Matt.

"Ain't ridin' in a-tall. You an' him will live in th' old line house, thank God. Funny things has happened; but everythin's quiet now. Slim Condon is with Milt now, keepin' him company. Ha!" he snorted, and laughed. "Now that it's goin' to be Skinner ag'in Skinner, somebody oughta get skun!"

"Mebby," said Matt, arising. "Reckon I'll go 'round front where th' foreman can find me. Has he been foreman very long?"

"Three, four years. If yo're goin' out to Milt you

better take some supplies. They must be near out. I got a whole load ready."

"Keno," grunted Matt, departing.

The foreman found him draped on a bench outside the bunkroom door and smiled down at him.

"Well, Skinner," he said. "Better start before dark. Tell Condon to ride in. You'll find a cayuse tied to th' corral, an' a pack saddle near it. Cook'll give you all you need. See that trail?" he asked, pointing. "Foller that. It'll lead you to th' line house. Milt will tell you what you oughta know; but I shore wish yore name wasn't Skinner."

"Takes a Skinner to catch a Skinner, mebby," replied Matt. "Bud been pesterin' you?"

The foreman's profane reply trailed off into a grumble, and he smiled slightly. "There ain't no rustlin' goin' on now," he finished.

A few minutes later Matt led the pack horse to the cook shack and went in. The cook was busy in the bunkroom and Matt slipped the glass jar into his slicker roll and then went back into the house, where he helped the returning cook fill the two gunny sacks with supplies. The cook left the stove long enough to help load the pack saddle and then grinned after the departing puncher.

"Skinner ag'in Skinner!" he chuckled. "Yo're shore welcome to yore job, friend; as long as you can stick!"

CHAPTER VII

MR. SKINNER ARRIVES

MATT had been riding an hour when he saw a sombrero push up over a rise ahead. The newcomer topped the low skyline and kept on down the slope without changing pace, having recognized the pack horse at once. When close to Matt he drew up and smiled.

"You'll mebby be in time to feed," said Slim Condon. "Aimin' to stay there reg'lar?"

"Yes."

"Milt will be glad to see them supplies. I was goin' in for some. When you get there turn that pack hoss loose an' he'll wander back to th' ranchhouse. So-long."

"So-long," replied Matt, moving on.

In another hour he reached the beginning of a long arroyo which wound away as far as he could see. The trail led down into it and as the ground sloped he pulled up without thinking.

"What made me do that?" he grumbled. "I'm a plain chump. Pete, you got a lot to put up with. You've got a long-eared jackass for a—*huh! Long Jack*—that was scared away! I got a feelin': come on, Pete. We're ridin' along back of the top of this here

arroyo, an' not through it, but I don't know what for."

It appeared that Matt Skinner's subconscious warnings were working at full efficiency.

His detour made one of four movements going on simultaneously and far apart. He was riding off the trail toward the line house; Slim Condon was travelling along the trail for the bunkhouse, and he had expected to return the same way that night; a party of four men were riding through an arroyo to the east of the line house, and three of their friends were killing time and waiting for darkness in the arroyo which Matt had scorned.

Matt found the going rough and lost time riding around obstructions. Soon the failing light warned him to locate the trail and push on along it if he was to find the line house. It had been dark for an hour when he reached his destination and fastened the rope of the home-loving pack animal to the saddle on Pete.

He stepped toward the door and his foot came down on something familiar, and he picked up a six-gun. His fingers, casually sliding over the satiny smoothness of the walnut grips, stopped suddenly and traced along the uneven grooves which they encountered. To make certain he traced them again, and there could be no doubt about it. It was a fool habit, this urging some men had to cut their initials on gun butt or knife handle. If a man had to carve his initials on something, let him pick out a cradle and play safe. The thought made him chuckle: safety in carving was not always to be found there. He laughed over the possibilities for trouble

which easily might come from carving initials on a cradle, and then got back to the matter before him.

Milt Glenn's six-gun had lain in the dirt near the door. It could have been tossed, knocked out of the hand that held it, dropped, or slid out of the holster. Even a man who carved his initials on a gun hardly would toss it or drop it; if it had been knocked there, that meant trouble; if it had slipped from the holster, the latter must have been tipped a great deal, and a man standing or walking wouldn't tip his sheath so the gun would fall out. Long Jack had been frightened away; Taggart had been curious to learn if his new man was gun shy; here lay an "M.G." six-gun, to be stepped on. He'd better lead the horses off a short distance and use all his senses. He had a "feelin'," and it was growing like warm dough filled with yeast.

Doubtful about the usefulness of the picked-up gun, he shifted it to his left hand, drew his own Colt, and slipped to the door of the house. Hearing nothing, he slid in and stopped against the wall, testing the dark with eyes, ears, and nose. He could see nothing, but a faint although sharp crackle made him crouch. It came again, and the difference between the two gave him an average which explained the sound: the fire in the stove was dying. His nose, although the sense of smell is almost useless when it comes to picking out the component parts of a composite odour, was not called upon for fine discrimination. The general odour of cooked or cooking food was all it sought, and it failed to find anything suggesting that any cooking had gone on since the noon meal.

He placed Milt's gun on the floor and drew a match from his pocket, but checked the movement that would have lighted it. Why hadn't there been any cooking since noon? Again there sounded the faint but sharp crackle, and he followed the sound and touched the stove. It was cold, and he gently lifted a lid and looked in, finding a few crackling bits of burned kindling that still glowed in places. The fire had not been hot enough to take the chill out of the iron, and it must have been lighted very recently, for such small stuff would soon burn out. If there was danger it still was close to him.

He glanced toward the doorway, and hastened outside to get the packs and the saddles off the horses. This did not take long, and after carrying them into the house he faced the door to go out again and take care of the animals. Here was plenty to think about, although it might amount to nothing. He was no coward, but uneasiness does not necessarily mean cowardice: it often indicates a delicate balance in the nervous organization, a higher degree of reflex action, an unusual refinement of coördination between the afferent and efferent nerves. He was as sensitive as a hound to objective forces, and he had a "feelin'."

As he stepped outside he pulled the door after him and checked it when the span of his extended thumb and little finger touched its edge and the edge of the casing at the same time, and he was glad that the door was hard to move. If it were opened during his absence be would know it. He slipped along the wall and soon was leading the horses at the end of a forty-five

foot lariat. This distance was security against a shot, a flying knife, or a sudden rush toward the sound of the walking animals. Nothing happened and he left them staked out in a grassy hollow where they would be hidden better and where their tramping hoofs would be somewhat muffled.

His return to the house would have done credit to a Pawnee horse thief. After listening at the door his left hand reached out and measured the gap between it and the casing, finding it the same. He slipped inside, closed the door after him, and felt around for the bunks, searching for blankets with which to cover the window and to baffle the cracks around the door. Finding what he wanted, he masked the openings and then, striking a match against the wall at the full length of his left arm while his right held a ready Colt, he flashed a look around and lit the lamp, turning it low.

A saddle lay in a corner, the lariat missing. The rope had been cut, suggesting that, easy as that kind of a knot usually was, cutting had been considered quicker. Behind the saddle, leaning against the wall, was a repeating Winchester, 1873 model, a very popular weapon, since it was chambered to take revolver cartridges. He preferred his heavy single-shot Sharps. On the saddle were the initials "M. G." done in silver-headed tacks and the same letters were cut in the stock of the rifle.

Across one corner of the room was a flimsy, dirty curtain. This would have been examined as a matter of curiosity by any hostile stranger and might be examined again, since it comfortably would hide a man.

It would not do for the supplies and his riding equipment. One of the bunks showed a cotton blanket, serving as a sheet, which hung over and halfway to the floor. He put his packs and equipment under this and pulled the sheet a little lower, preferring this place to the curtain. Needs must when the devil drives: it would have to do.

He memorized the room and then, blowing out the lamp, removed the blankets and tried to put them back on the bunks as he had found them. Thanks to his uncanny, unconscious memorizing, he would have been surprised could he have known how well this was done. A careless man would see no difference. He opened the door and waited for the lamp chimney to cool and the kerosene odour to thin a little and then went outside, closed the door after him, and crept from the house.

He was glad that he had eaten the cook's two bowls of beans. Except for the uncertainty of meals he felt he was going to like his new job better than any he ever had held; but he must not miss the first opportunity to put his wads of bills into the glass jar and cache it.

He was worried about Milt. There was no telling what had happened to him, but that something unpleasant had happened he was morally certain. When a man is tipped so far from the vertical that his six-gun slides out of its holster, it means something; and that he did not draw it was suggested by the fact that it lay on the ground. If any one had noticed it enough to tear or knock it from its owner's grip he would have kept such a weapon until daylight showed him the initials. Therefore, Milt's hands had not been able to

reach for it, for had they been able, drawing the gun would have been an instinctive movement. Matt suspected that his line partner's arms had been caught in a noose and made fast before their possessor could use them. Either that or Milt, gun in hand, had been knocked unconscious and let the weapon fall from his relaxing fingers.

He began to cruise about, zig-zagging back and forth. His imagination was going strong and there were quite a few people who would not have slept so soundly on this night if they had known the fantastic thoughts streaming through the quirky mind of this cow-puncher. Being a stranger to the locality, he was handicapped by not having a fund of local knowledge; but having so little local knowledge, he was free from the prejudices which otherwise might have shaped his thinking. He knew only what he had been told, and therefore suspected everyone. As he moved back and forth he fabricated fanciful possibilities, some of which struck him as being worth while.

He came upon the two horses and heard a low whinny. Pete was lonesome and had scented him. He could hear the *crop-crop* of the pack horse as it grazed. This was the animal that would go home if turned loose. Evidently it was customary to let it go home, and as he did not want to do anything to start people thinking, he pulled out the stake, securely fastened the lead rope to the pack saddle and started the animal on its way. He thus planted a husky and germinating acorn without realizing it; but after the horse had disappeared he felt a little disturbed and wondered

why he had not let well enough alone. He could have let it go at daybreak.

Working around to the north of the house he found himself in a sparse bit of timber. A sound behind him made him whirl and crouch, staring in vain through the dark in the direction of the adobe. After a moment he persuaded himself that he had too active an imagination, and went on again. Several minutes later he froze at the sound of a low moan, which came from a point on his left, and after a swift and cautious detour he approached the suspicious spot from the other side. It came again, so close that he stretched out his left hand and felt before him. Two silent steps let him feel the body of a man, and his arms wrapped around it like a flash to pin down the gun hand and hamper a draw. His clutching fingers struck rope, and a groan in his ear told him that he had found the missing line guard.

He cut the rope from around the unfortunate's neck and placed the fainting man on the ground while he severed the other ropes and removed the gag. Slinging the inert body on his back he struck straight for the house, desperately anxious to get Milt into a bunk and to work over him before it was too late. He had no choice but to disregard any but a straight course and save what precious time he could.

Reaching the house he was about to push open the door when his hand slid through the opening between the door and the casing. Unreasoning rage boiled up in him as he placed his burden gently on the ground. He carefully had closed the door, and now it was open

a full two inches. That sound had been damnably real. On one hand was Milt's life, flickering as he thought; on the other was his own, pulsing strong. He crouched and leaped as his outstretched left hand thrust the door wide open and he alighted in a squatting position, his Colt in his right hand and a flaring match, springing from the wall, in the other. He was alone, but the strong odour of a reeking pipe lay heavy in his nostrils. He got Milt and placed him in a bunk and then, frantically hanging blankets over window and door, lighted the lamp and grabbed the partly emptied whiskey bottle from the shelf over the stove. He glimpsed a burned match on the floor and shoved a hand in his pocket: the two he had struck in the house met his fingers. The one on the floor must have lit the pipe that stunk up the room. The rifle he had seen behind the saddle was not there. These two things had been noted instinctively while he worked over his line mate. Why had they come back? Perhaps to be sure Condon did not escape if he was missed by an ambush in the arroyo. Whiskey and rubbing began to yield returns, faster and faster, and when Milt opened his eyes Matt sighed and gave him one more drink. Milt's neck was bruised and swollen, his wrists lacerated, and he moved his legs as if they pained him.

"That was close," grunted Matt as he crammed kindling into the stove and looked around for heavier fuel. He glanced at his companion and found the brown eyes regarding him with great interest.

"Outside—east wall," mumbled Milt, trying to re-

member where he had seen that face before. "But—*look out!*"

"Huh!" grunted Matt, pleased with himself. Those two words verified his conjectures. "Reckon you don't feel like eatin', but *I* do. Good thing that rope had a lot of stretch; you'd be deader'n hell if it hadn't."

He put out the light and was gone for a few moments. When he returned he dumped an armful of wood against the wall, fixed the blanket again, and then started the fire.

"If they see th' sparks they'll know somebody's here," he observed; "but them blankets won't let 'em see how to shoot without bustin' in th' door; an' that's somethin' I hope to God they try! You had a narrer squeak, an' nobody could 'a' bailed you out of *that!*"

"Damn my eyes!" ejaculated Milt, rolling on his side to save his neck. "Matt Skinner! What you doin', you ol' mule-skinner?"

"Tryin' to live it down," chuckled Matt; "but I'm shore ready to start skinnin'!" He was working purposefully and soon the odour of cooking food filled the room.

"Condon! He comin' back?" suddenly asked Milt in a voice that made his companion start.

Milt could only mean one man. "No," answered Matt. "Told him I was takin' his place, reg'lar. Why?"

Milt heaved a sigh of relief. "There's three of 'em layin' for him by th' trail in th' arroyo."

"Who was th' others?" asked Matt, fussing with the frying pan. He wondered if he would have time to

eat the meal, and glanced around the room to appraise its defensive possibilities.

"Don't know," growled Milt.

"What'd they smell like?"

"Damn my eyes!" said Milt, with respect. "Greasers, I think!" He rubbed his legs, and immediately apologized. "They're sore. They strung me up with my own rope till my toes just cleared. By shiftin' my hips I could get one set on th' ground a little at one time. Then I'd shift. I couldn't 'a' held out much longer."

"Jumped you in a bunch at th' wood-pile," stated Matt.

"Yes; blankets an' ropes."

"Toted you by yore head an' feet, an' you sagged quite some in th' middle?" asked his companion idly, thinking about the "M. G." six-gun he had found.

"Yes: what of it?" There was no reply, and Milt continued. "Only got a flash at 'em, an' it was dark. They was masked, too."

"That how they scared off Long Jack?"

"No; drug him from a stirrup. When he come to there was a note on his shirt, tellin' him to vamoose th' country. He did."

"Shouldn't wonder," commented Matt, trying to hasten the cooking by an act of will. "Hurt bad?"

"Don't know. Didn't see him. He left me a note tied on th' whiskey bottle."

"He's no fool, then," mumbled Matt, frowning at the stove.

"What you say?"

"I asked if he was a friend of th' foreman."

"Yes; thick as thieves."

"An' *I* ain't no fool," muttered the worrying cook.

"What you say?"

"Recitin' th' Lord's Prayer backward for luck. We're goin' to have callers damn soon, lookin' for Condon." He kicked the stove. "This damned wood petrified?"

"'Course not." Milt pondered a moment. "Meanin' that they will trail you here, thinkin' yo're Slim?"

"From what you said they won't trail *me*."

"They will!" exclaimed Milt, sitting up and bumping his head against the bunk above him. "We'll get in some cracks at 'em, Matt!"

"I didn't come through th' arroyo," explained Matt. "I had a feelin', an' went along behind th' top."

Milt's face fell. "Shucks—that's too bad."

"An' I had a feelin' when I turned that pack hoss loose," said Matt, grinning. "It come too late. He'll go back along that trail, I reckon, an' they'll wonder where th' man is that brought him out."

Revenge must operate as a powerful stimulant, for Milt left the bunk and crossed the room with creditable steadiness, eager to pick his six-gun off the floor.

"That door'll take some bustin'," he said. "We got plenty of grub, but no water. I'll rustle some *pronto*."

"Set down," said Matt. "Th' less water, th' better; an' we'll tote off all th' grub an' cache it. You rustle in a lot of grass an' weeds. Th' greener th' better." He picked up a box and started toward the

door. "Don't waste no time. Th' fire's goin' strong, now I can't finish th' cookin'. When I get back I'll help you with th' grass."

"You *loco*?" demanded Milt.

"Mebby they wasn't aimin' to kill you," said Matt, turning down the lamp. "They would 'a' histed you higher if they was. Aimin' to torture you, teach you a lesson, get rid of another line rider, like they mebby did Long Jack. They mebby figgered on cuttin' you down after they got that Condon feller. Reckon I didn't do no harm, lettin' that pack hoss loose." He rubbed his chin reflectively. "Not that it don't make any difference, only I allus hate to reap what I sow. Come on: time's flyin'."

When Matt returned to the house he looked like he had crawled in dust, and something was very much wrong with the stove, due to Matt's choking the chimney. He tied up the pack, upended the water barrel, waved his staring companion to the door, and then, cramming the grass and weeds into the hot stove, adjusted the blankets covering the window. Closing the door behind him he picked up the packs.

"You know th' layout," he said. "Pick a nice place facin' th' door. Then keep yore mouth shut an' yore ears open. Don't shoot till I do, an' then give 'em hell."

Milt touched his arm. "They didn't get my cayuse: hear him?"

"He's talkin' to Pete," said Matt. "Quick! Get yourn an' I'll get mine. Meet you thirty paces in front of this door. Move fast!" He made a sound

like a winged grasshopper. "When you hear that, it's me." He moved away, the packs weighing him down.

Minutes passed and then soft hoof falls went past the house and soon a flying grasshopper crackled drily.

"Here," said Milt. "That's right. *Now* what?"

"Th' cayuses may come in handy," explained Matt. "Show me where we're goin' to wait. We ain't got much time."

He followed Milt and sank down beside him. There were faint lines of light around the closed door, the clouds were breaking as they moved, stars shining and then going out. Soft and intermittent rustlings told that the night-moving smaller animals were foraging; and the sudden, startled sniff which hushed the rustlings gave a coyote away as he turned and fled from this dangerous place. No air stirred, and Matt excused the coyote's bungling.

"Lucky for me that you didn't hole up in th' house when you first came," muttered Milt, his mind on his own hanging. "They *wasn't* comin' back. I heard 'em whisperin'. I'm glad you let th' pack hoss go, if it brings 'em here lookin' for Condon. Hope I shoot straight in th' dark."

"Won't be so dark where we shoot," replied Matt. "Just th' same, shootin' straight will be mostly a matter of luck. I hope that lamp don't get suffocated an' go out."

"We could 'a' held th' house," growled Milt.

"Rather stay in th' dark an' shoot at th' light, usin' th' house as bait. What you know about th' Peabody

fambly?" He squeezed his companion's arm. "Keep quiet!" he whispered.

The minutes dragged, seeming like hours. A twig snapped behind them, the sound coming from the direction of the place where Milt had been strung up. It was very dark in there and there was no moaning to guide a searcher. Again a twig snapped, to the left. Matt smiled. Unless they blundered into the dangling rope they would discover nothing. He hoped they would not find the horses and that the two animals would consider that they were company enough for each other and not whinny to the rustlers' mounts. Then he remembered that there was no wind and that the other animals must have been left a good distance from the house or he would have heard them. He placed his hand on his companion's leg and felt him start. Milt was trembling with eagerness and a seething rage, and he smothered a curse that dripped with venom.

One, two, three, faster than he could count, the lighted cracks in the door twinkled, and Matt knew that somebody had crept swiftly past the opening. He bet himself ten dollars that the skulker had removed his boots. Again the cracks twinkled, starting from the right, as they had before. Another man had passed across. From the methodical way these men were going about their business it was evident that they carefully had planned the murders of the two line riders. Notwithstanding what Milt had said he believed they had left him to die, and the thought pleased him; they deserved all they got.

Another twig snapped, this time in front, and now that the searcher was giving up his task Matt felt it was only a question of a few minutes. He breathed two words in his companion's ear.

"I've been ready for hours!" breathed Milt in reply. His vocal chords vibrated sympathetically as a silent string of curses passed through his mind.

The lighted cracks were blotted out as the attackers massed before the door, and for one instant the darkness was unchallenged; and then a flood of light poured out into the night as the concerted attack slammed the door back against the inner wall and four men pitched to the floor. They were surprised, for they had thought the door barred and barricaded. It was like a man smashing at a rock with a ten-pound sledge and finding he had hit an egg. Coincident with the sprawling came a billowing cloud of blue-gray smoke from the cabin so thick that a man could not see his feet through it; and at the same time fire streaked and spurted from the guns of Matt and Milt, the slugs streaming through the open door. Yells, curses, both choked; frantic scrambling, figures going down and popping up; pale yellow streaks of fire almost hidden by the heavy grass smoke that changed their colour, which clung to and swirled about each fleeing rustler as he plunged into the night and raced to his horse, his wounds small hindrance in the urging of such a terror.

Matt and his companion sank down, somewhat out of breath, to the rear of the house, crowding cartridges into their guns. Against the clearing sky a rectangular bulk stood out on top of the chimney, canted rakishly

to fit the rust-eaten slope of the ancient stove-pipe. Matt saluted it gravely. He was a little chagrined that three men should get away, but found consolation in the fact that there had been four when the door crashed back.

"You got one, Milt," he whispered, generously.

"Liar that you are," said Milt, truthfully. "I'm bettin' I missed by feet."

The night crept past reluctantly. There came a lightening of the eastern sky and Dawn's skirmishers felt the way for the golden host.

Matt slipped away south from the line house, and when he returned he came from the north. As he emerged from the woods of his companion's ordeal, he saw that young man arise from a shallow wash to the east, and they met before the door, where they hesitated, somehow reluctant to pass the portal.

Matt filled and lit his pipe and abruptly stepped inside.

"You should 'a' spread 'em," he said, sticking his head out of the door. "There ain't no sense shootin' in a groove; no more than there is cuttin' yore initials on yore six-gun, for some jury to look at. Come in an' see if you know him."

Milt obeyed. "That wasn't my shootin', an' I never saw him before," he muttered. "He—he fair reeks with whiskey," he blurted, feeling he had to say something more.

"Yes," said Matt. "There shore was a moanin' at th' *bar* when *he* put out to sea."

CHAPTER VIII

SCANDAL

CALVIN HOWARD, burning with the fires of vengeance, reached Los Altos quicker than he ever had reached it before from the same starting point, and leaped from a spent horse before the bank building in which he had his office. At a curt motion of his hand a Mexican slouched from the scant shade of a building and led the animal away. Loungers along the street, emerging from the late afternoon shadows, raised eyebrows at the condition of the horse, and at the black scowl on the lawyer's face as he went past them. It was not that they had any sympathy for the animal, but that they were drawing conclusions of interest from the evidence presented.

The lawyer's infatuation for Agnes Glenn was well known, as well known as was his jealous disposition and quick temper. Among these loungers he had friends, for his pleading had helped many of them when they had been before the bar of justice. His addresses to a jury were always worth listening to, and he was enjoying a rapid rise in his practice in criminal cases. Being the son of the president of the Los Altos Bank, he had begun his practice in civil law as the attorney for the bank, and criminal law had been a side line;

but as time went on he realized that the better path to political progress lay in the latter branch of jurisprudence. The former tied him to the wealthier but numerically lesser class, and every case made him enemies among the voting masses; the latter played strongly to numbers, and it is numbers, turned into votes, which make a political ladder.

He was from Northern stock. His father and three uncles had marched from Massachusetts in answer to Lincoln's first call, a fact which his father had seen no reason to hide. In this new territory were many whose sympathies lay with the South, and this would sway a delicate balance in their choice of candidates. Calvin Howard overlooked nothing which might threaten his success in his chosen field. Randall Glenn was from a Virginia family which had borne its full share of the war under the Stars and Bars; the rancher was well-to-do and highly thought of; he was a cowman and an influence among cowmen. Calvin Howard regarded it as being fortunate that his affections should wrap themselves of their own accord about Agnes Glenn, and he could not help but be pleased by the way his fortunes would be aided by such an alliance.

He was headstrong, high-handed, quick-tempered, and intensely jealous; she was proud, capricious, and not to be ruled with an iron hand; she craved attentions and demanded more freedom than he was pleased to give her, not knowing that when the right man came she would, of her own accord, be the woman that Calvin was trying to force her to become. Their courtship was a stormy one, frowns as numerous as smiles, hard

words as common as tender ones; the unreasonable jealousy of the one ever was at war with the independent spirit of the other. Their quarrels distressed their friends and had spoiled many pleasant affairs, and at last had become fair gossip throughout the county.

Calvin stamped into his father's office and held a short argument with him, gained his point, and exulted. The bank would see that no one else took up Glenn's note when it was due. He went up to his own office and hurled his hat into a corner. An apologetic cough made him wheel and scowl at a Mexican humped up in a chair.

"What you want, Raminez?" he barked.

"Juan ees een tr-rouble," muttered the other.

"What is it? Same old thing?"

"*Si;* but theese time eet ees not hees fault," explained Raminez, father of Juan. "Miguel tr-ry to e-stab heem. He gr-rab Miguel, an' een thee str-rugle Miguel ees hur-rt. Juan ees ar-rest."

"Kill him?" asked Calvin, his thoughts elsewhere.

"But no! He ees only e-scratch, *piojo* that he ees!"

"All right. I'll do what I can. You hunt up the witnesses and give me their names. You'll have plenty of time. I'm busy now. *Buenos días.*"

"I haf fr-riends. I get witnesses. *Buenos días, señor; buenos días.*"

Calvin shut the door after his departing client and flung himself into his easy chair. Anger and jealousy led him a merry dance, and in the heat of it an exultant peal of laughter rang out from the street below. He gripped his hands; he'd teach the owner of that voice

what it meant to flirt with the promised bride of Calvin Howard. He leaped from the chair and raced down the stairs, hatless, his face working with rage.

On the edge of the sidewalk Bob Winters was talking to two friends, recounting a humorous incident which he had experienced in his capacity of prosecuting attorney, and he laughed again; unfortunately, as he did so he chanced to look at the man who catapulted from the stairway. Calvin's rage flamed higher, and without a word he leaped at the laughing prosecutor.

Winters found his throat throttled before he could move; but coincident with the closing of the grip his two companions leaped into action. There was a short flurry and Winters stepped back, a hand to his throat, and stared at the raging man held by the peacemakers, listening to the shouted, hysterical denouncement, flushing under the epithets.

"You're out of your head," he said, "but I'll trouble you to leave her out of it. You're not accountable for what you're saying, but if you mention her name again I'll hold you accountable, here and now."

Howard's voice rose until it screamed a mad indictment interlarded with curses.

Winters motioned to his friends and they reluctantly loosed their holds and stepped back. Howard sprang again, blind with fury, his clenched hands flailing before him. The rapidly augmenting crowd surged back before his charge and then closed solidly about the storm centre, stamping this way and that as the battle shifted. The two friends, swirled to the outer edge of the crowd, rallied friends to their aid, and fought their

way to the inner ring, and soon the combatants were being led in opposite directions from the street.

The town was agog with excitement, the brawl furnishing tender meat for gossiping mouths, and embellishments fastened to the repeated story like swamp slime to careless boots. It was recalled what bitter foes these two men had been in their encounters before the criminal bar, and darkness had not fallen before delectable stories were flying throughout the county. Surmises as to what the future would bring forth were rich and hopeful. Unconsciously and otherwise there was a choosing of sides, in many cases the partisanship flaring high. Here was shredded tinder ready for the spark, and but for the coolness of better heads a conflagration would have raged that would have taken some putting out; but the better heads prevailed and the fire smoldered, although dangerously. Calvin had given way to anger and seemed to have lost his common sense. He thought only of revenge, and used no judgment.

Next day, late in the afternoon, the news reached the Glenn family from different directions. It found Milt near the end of the east line; Agnes, at the ranchhouse.

Agnes had changed her riding costume for a dress better suited for the house, and as she fastened the last button a knock on the door made her grimace. She knew that knock. What was it to be this time? Censure for having galloped over the range last Sunday instead of going to church in Los Altos? Or was she in for an attempt at peace-making, since Calvin's father was a liberal supporter of the church?

She opened the heavy door.

"Come in, Mr. Perkins. Uncle Randall is not here now, but is likely to ride in at any moment."

"Thank you, Miss Agnes," purred the Reverend Mr. Perkins, gliding to the chair indicated and waiting until she had seated herself. "I really called, as it were, in passing. It was most opportune that I chanced to be riding this way—er—enabling me, as it were, to combine the pleasure of a visit to the ranch with the performance of a task—er—that is not the most agreeable. I felt that you should know what is being said so it would not—er—come as a shock from unkind lips and distress you—er—unduly." He folded his hands and leaned back in his chair. "In my capacity of minister I must face the—er—disagreeable with the same equanimity that I—er—do the agreeable. As your pastor it is peculiarly my duty to acquaint you with a most lamentable episode." The heavy thumbs revolved around each other and he cleared his throat.

"Yes? What is it?"

"I have watched the affair with a most benign interest," he continued in a voice heavy with sorrow, but tinged with a self-complacent superiority. "Therefore it is with regret that I have to tell you of an incident, if one may call it by so mild a term, that has caused your name—er—to be unpleasantly bruited about the county. Of course, my *dear* Miss Agnes, it is no fault of yours. I am certain that the thinking people of the county will so view it."

"Indeed?" she inquired, her curiosity ungrudgingly making way for another feeling. "Then I am un-

fortunate. The thinking people are always in such a hopeless minority." Her eyes sparked. "Just what have you to tell me?"

"I find it hard to hold either of the—er—combatants strictly to blame," he went on. "Certainly *not* Mr. Calvin. There are so many versions of the affair that one must pick out the facts with care. But I must confess that I am disappointed in our able prosecuting attorney. Of course, we understand that young men—ahem—are easily excited. While the actions of the young men in question were very unfortunate, the *really* unfortunate thing about it is the way—ahem—in which your name was misused. Therefore, I thought it wise to prepare you."

"Will you please tell me what this is all about?"

"It was no more than a fight between jealous lovers," he assured her. "Somebody started it, of course: just who, is not clear. Very probably, since he is your affianced, Calvin objected to certain mention of your name, especially since it was made in public, and resented it. That would seem to be the truth of the matter, considering his affections and his Quixotic nature. No doubt you will hear other versions; but, as I said, it will be well to determine which are the most probable."

"You mean that Calvin Howard and Bob Winters fought about me?" she asked. "That my name was the excuse for a brawl between them?"

"I am sorry to say that such is what I mean, but I feel that Calvin's part is excused——"

"I disagree with you!" She was on her feet. "If

Mr. Howard puts his foot on this ranch for the purpose of seeing me, I'll tell the boys to throw him off. That also goes for Mr. Wint——"

"Hey, Miss Agnes!" called a husky voice outside.

She turned and saw Reb Ventre leaning from his saddle. His lip was cut and his enunciation far from perfect.

"What is it, Reb?" she asked, stepping to the door. "And what have you been doing to yourself?"

"Aw, shucks; this dancin' idjut plumb slid me off into a barb-wire fence," said Reb, grinning. He lowered his head until he could see farther into the room, and the grin grew. "Parson's been tellin' you all about it, I reckon; but you might as well know th' truth. Bob Winters told Cal to shut his mouth about you. Cal opened it wider, an' Bob done what he said he would. Bob's sudden. He beat one of our boys by ten feet an' hogged it all; but, of course, he was closter at th' start."

Agnes was glaring at the happy chump in the saddle, but before she could properly shape her retort she read the friendliness shining on the disfigured face. Her gaze fixed on the split lip.

"An' just at that thrillin' moment yore cayuse r'ared an' slid you into th' wire," she said, thoroughly at home in his vocabulary. "Reb, there ain't a man on this ranch—workin' for it, I mean—that's a good liar. You go down to th' bunkhouse an' tell th' boys that they ain't to get slid into no barb-wire. Yo're shore you saw it all, an' know what yo're talkin' about?"

Reb turned his head to spit, winced as the tobacco

flooded the split in his lip, and then looked at her reproachfully.

"Miss Agnes, I can't peddle th' English language like some I knows of, but I ain't apologizin' for my eyes an' ears. I was lookin' an' listenin' before I could talk." He peered into the room again and shifted his cud. "Any little thing I can do for you before I pull out?" he asked hopefully.

"There is. You might catch Mr. Perkins's cayuse for him an' help him into th' saddle. An' if Mr. Howard drifts over th' boundaries you can persuade him to go back again."

"I'm a born persuader," he averred, reaching out a careless hand and grasping the reins of the horse which had stood sleepily alongside him since he had ridden up. "Whoa, *you!*" he roared, yanking the reins and waking up the placid beast. "Whoa, thar! Stan' still, cuss you! Hey, Parson, get a rustle on. Damned if I can hold him much longer, an' it shore would be too bad if you had to hoof it all th' way to town, with th' evenin' comin' on."

The parson, red of face and very indignant, hastened to the door. He sensed a harsh note in the puncher's pleasantries and when he had a good look at the disfigured face and caught the eager and pugnacious gleam in the puncher's eyes he felt that he was, indeed, in the hands of the Philistines. He grasped reins and pommel and laboriously drew himself into the saddle, a task not gracefully accomplished because Reb's spur carelessly rolled along the prominent ribs of the parson's mount. At last in the saddle, firmly in it he hoped, he

turned the aged beast's head toward Los Altos and urged it thither.

Side by side Agnes and the puncher watched the minister bounce on his way. Agnes sighed and looked into the bruised face of her companion.

"I've brought trouble to Uncle Randall," she said. "I hate to tell him."

"Let it go till mornin'," suggested Reb, gently touching his lip with the tip of a finger. "No use spoilin' his night's sleep, an' he can't do nothin' till mornin', anyhow. After breakfast he'll be ready for anythin'."

"Was there—was there much of a—a brawl, Reb?"

"Quite some. Most of th' fightin' was done in th' stoppin' of it, an' there wasn't a gun pulled 'cept mine. I only used th' butt after some ignerent cuss took me for an enemy." He laughed suddenly. "I'd 'a' got th' mail, too, only th' sheriff got between me an' th' post office. So I just climbed in th' saddle an' rode 'round th' country a little." He regarded her with an earnest expression. "Don't you worry, Miss Agnes: 'tain't yore fault."

CHAPTER IX

THE NORTHEAST CORNER

OUT in the line house the two punchers had slept a little and then Milt had gone after the horses, and as he dipped down over a rise Matt drew the glass jar from under a bunk and slipped from the house. When he returned he was chuckling: most people buried things in hollows. He had chosen a skyline. When he had a problem in human nature to solve he tried the instincts first; when he wanted to keep others from solving any problem he might present, he coppered the race instincts. His money now lay in the middle of a little grass plot, and as soon as the edges of the sod knitted he would have no cause for worry.

Milt rode up, leading Pete and scowling at the lariat in his hand. He jumped to the ground and thrust the rope under his companion's eyes.

"There it is!" he snapped. "I'll kill Bud Skinner for this!"

"Oughta be glad they didn't plumb ruin it," suggested Matt. "It was too long, anyhow, for a rope as thick as that." He examined the knot. "Never saw one like this: lookit—one jams ag'in th' other an' can't slip down. Never saw a puncher tie one like that. It's right smart. Huh, I wouldn't swap jobs right now

with th' King of Injia. Wonder why they ain't come back?" He laughed and dropped the knot. "A feller never *is* hungry on a full belly. What we goin' to do now?"

"Th' quicker you know somethin' about th' ranch th' better it'll be," said Milt. "What you say we ride th' line, takin' the north end first? That's th' most interestin'."

"Have you allus reckoned it was th' most interestin'?" asked Matt.

"What you mean?"

"Just wonderin' if last night has anythin' to do with that."

"Last night shore has; but it allus was th' most interestin'. As we go along you'll see why."

"All right," replied Matt, gazing abstractedly at a patch of grass on the highest hump of the highest ridge within fair rifle shot of the house. No one but a fool would think of looking for buried treasure on that top-knot; unless he was so pessimistic about the intelligence of the genus homo that he coppered every bet based on it. His glance passed on. "An' what about th' *un*-interestin' part of th' line?"

"Th' range slopes up as th' mountains slope down," answered Milt. "That's why there ain't no canyons through that end of th' ridge."

"Feller don't have to cross over at just certain spots, huh?"

"There's dozens of places to get over."

"Trails sorta wander right across, an' don't run together like th' spokes on one side of a wheel?"

"Yes," answered Milt, going into the house. He came out with a rifle.

"Where'd you get that?" demanded Matt. "Thought they took it?"

"It's another I had cached. We're well fixed, out here, to stand a siege."

Matt's eyes focussed on the "M. G." cut in the stock.

"You got a terrible habit of carvin' things, Milt. How old are you?"

"Twenty-two; why?"

"Nothin'. Let's get a-goin'."

They rode along a narrow trail, a line of least resistance beaten out by the line riders. As they went along Milt told all he knew about this part of the ranch and what had taken place on it, and Matt's replies were hardly more than grunts or nods, but once in awhile he asked a question far from the subject matter. One of them was if Long Jack had any set preference in smoking: did he use a pipe or smoke cigarettes? When the question was answered he said he did not blame the unfortunate puncher, since any man knew there was no substance in a cigarette. Milt touched upon the Peabody family and his companion showed a mild interest and asked a few careless questions. Then Matt slobbered tobacco juice on the back of his hand, frowned at his carelessness, and remarked that the stain looked like tattooing.

"Never saw no tattooin', but I've seen pictures of it," said Milt.

"Surprised you ain't tattooed all over," replied Matt,

hiding his disappointment. "Ain't you never seen a sailor?"

"I knowed th' engineer of a 'Frisco-Seattle boat," answered Milt. "First chance I have I'll get tattooed, though."

"I'll bet eight thousan' dollars on that," said Matt.

"I got th' design all figgered out, too."

"An' I'll bet on that. What is it?"

"A bare lady in green ink ridin' a purple cayuse that's tryin' to fall over backward."

"I lose," said Matt. "Why green?"

"Red or pink looks too much like a rash, or somethin'. They fill it all in with little dots."

"Th' whole idear looks rash to me. After you get that done you want to ride a plumb straight trail."

The farther they went the rougher the country became, and more and more the north-flowing creek was in evidence. They had crossed and recrossed it several times when they came to a hillside slough, a swamp held in a wide bench near the base of the range. Seepage had stained the face of the wall and formed a smaller swamp below. Lush grass spread far afield until checked by the base of a hill on their left, and every step of their horses squashed beneath them.

"Where's all this water lead to?" asked Matt.

"Glenn's Canyon. It cuts through farther north an' comes out just below Striped Canyon on th' other side. It's purty well filled with sand. Nobody knows how far under th' rock bottom is. In th' rainy season th' crick roars through it; but in th' dry season, when th' crick's a ribbon, it sinks down in th' sand before it gets to th'

canyon, an' filters through, leavin' th' canyon floor dry."

"Huh!" grunted Matt. "Then you lose more cows in th' dry season than you do in th' wet."

"Yo're wrong," chuckled Milt. "I say we lose more in th' wet; Chet says we don't. He's listened to, an' I ain't. But that don't make no difference, because we ain't losin' none now."

"Do much line ridin', an' pokin' around?" asked Matt.

"Not no more; ain't no need to. Chet says to take it easy."

"So I'm wrong?" muttered Matt. "Well, it's a failin' of mine; but there's hopes for me as long as I don't get th' initialin' an' tattooin' habits. I'd ruther do my decoratin' on cows. That's th' kind I mean," he said, pointing to an animal pushing through some straggling brush. "I notice you don't do no sleeperin'. Ain't seen a single ear notch since I been in this country."

"You must 'a' come from th' east, then. There's plenty of 'em on th' west ranges. What made you ride so round-about from Vasquez?"

"I was told I could get a job by ridin' east. I'd be ridin' that way yet, only Bud Skinner put me right."

Milt scowled. "You know—Bud?"

"Met him for th' first time when I put up at his place. He likewise told me to go east for a job; but I was beginnin' to get an idear what th' east was, so I coppered Bud an' come here."

Milt grunted and glanced to the right. "Notice how these mountains, if you call 'em mountains, keep gettin' higher?"

"What you call 'em depends on what you've been used to," said Matt. "I wouldn't call 'em mountains, though they are big for hills. Just th' same, I like th' looks of 'em. Allus liked mountains, an' I'll be spendin' a lot of time ridin' 'round on 'em. One thing is shore: A man up on 'em can see a long ways off. You didn't finish tellin' me about th' rustlin'."

It was mid-afternoon when Milt pointed ahead at a large expanse of sand, oval in shape. That part of it nearest them was wet, but the larger part was bone dry. A bold promontory of rock curved down from the height above, in shape roughly like a Roman nose, and split the east side of the sand patch, running out on it a full hundred yards.

"Glenn's Canyon starts right around that corner," explained Milt. "This is th' sink, where th' crick disappears. There's a fair flow in it now, but it don't get far enough across th' sand to wet more'n a third of it. When th' crick's boomin' there's five feet of water out here an' a roarin' mess in th' canyon. A whirlpool forms just off th' point there, an' it's been knowed to pull a cow off its feet an' shoot it through th' canyon like a streak."

"Good thing to know," commented Matt.

"You bet! Funny thing happened once. A cloud burst up near th' line house, an' not a drop fell on th' other side of th' mountains. A wall of water went roarin' down th' crick into th' canyon. It come out

th' other end so fast it couldn't find room enough to flow north, but piled up an' went both ways. Part of it backed through Striped Canyon just as Hezekiah Peabody was ridin' through on his cayuse. First thing he knowed he was goin' past his house hangin' to a dead tree. He yelled for help, but was past before they could do anythin'. Then th' water fell an' him an' his tree started back ag'in. When he come in sight of th' house Obadiah swung a rope to pull him ashore. Th' loop dropped over a busted limb just as th' bank th' son was standin' on was undermined an' fell in. Th' rest of th' fambly was runnin' to help hold th' rope, but got there too late. When th' bank caved th' rope got caught around Obadiah's laig, an' he went streakin' after his father. Th' tree struck th' wall at th' end of th' canyon, stopped, swung out, and went on ag'in; but Obadiah had been slammed ag'in th' other end of it, and grabbed hold an' managed to stick. They went so far before they could get ashore that it took 'em 'most all night to walk home. Hezekiah said th' tree was as steady as a cata—cata-somethin', th' branches not lettin' it turn over."

"Catamount," said Matt, to show his ignorance while he cudgelled his memory. Often a cudgelled memory only grows balkier, but it can do surprising things. Like a flash came a picture of his talk with the Peabody family, and one motion he had observed stood out as if it were outlined in fire. He ceased the cudgelling and grinned.

"Yore story reminds me of th' feller that got washed over Pike's Peak in a cloudburst, an' only got th' seat

of his pants wet goin' up, an' they dried from th' friction of slidin' down th' other side, an' they caught on fire an' blistered him."

"Go to hell!" said Milt, and instantly and simultaneously both grabbed their rifles, rolled from the saddles, and dove for cover as the report of a gun reverberated along the ridge.

Matt rolled down the slope of a ravine, accumulating thorns and bruises, and went along the bottom on hands and knees, trailing his rifle. Milt crowded him. They gained the creek and splashed across it, sprinting for the safety offered by the face of the cliff. Here they paused and looked at each other.

"Take th' left," said Matt, and hastened in the opposite direction toward a crevice which split the face of the ridge. He climbed swiftly, bearing steadily away from the point of interest as soon as he reached the bench above the lower wall. When reasonably certain that he was above the place to be investigated, he cocked the rifle and began a cautious descent. Reaching the edge of a ledge he peered over, and grunted with surprise. Milt was standing on a narrow bench looking at a slatternly dressed woman who was pointing at something on the ground some distance away. Thereupon Matt lowered the hammer of the rifle and went down, stopping near Milt.

"Plumb through th' tomater," said the woman proudly as she picked up a tin can. She turned, saw Matt, and scowled frankly.

"How'd'y, ma'am," said Matt, observing that the ledge overlooked the range.

She spat a mouthful of tobacco juice toward him and her eyes snapped.

"Wish you'd seen it, you smart Aleck!" she said. "Mebby you wouldn't be so sassy with strange folks if you had."

"An' what was it I missed seein'?" asked Matt, quickly. He wondered for whom she was acting as lookout.

She patted the rifle and held out the can. "This, Mr. Ranger!" she snapped, and Milt's eyes flickered at the term she had used. "Shootin' plumb centre at nigh forty paces. I can put 'em thar four times outa five. You don't want to forget that, young man!"

"'Tain't possible," he retorted. "Where was th' can?"

"Right over yonder!"

Matt paced to the place indicated, as if he doubted her statement of the distance, and saw that the groove of the bullet in the earth was fresh. He laughed at the way she had excused the shot and at the way he and his companion had jumped for cover, but his mirth was misinterpreted.

"Reckon it's funny, huh?" sneered Mrs. Peabody, turning to look at Milt. "'Tain't half as funny as when rich folks has their darter talked about over th' hull country! Ye can't tell me it wasn't for nothin' Cal Howard an' that lyin' Winters was fightin' in th' street. Fine names Cal called her, an' I reckon he knowed what he was talkin' about!" She sneered again. "*Now* laugh, damn ye!"

"What you mean?" growled Milt, stepping forward, his eyes blazing.

"Stand whar ye air!" snapped the woman, swinging up the rifle. "I'm alone, out hyar, but that ain't worryin' me. You stand thar an' listen to somethin' that *is* funny," and as he stopped she poured out the story of the brawl, adding trimmings and calling spades by no other name. Her gloating spite made Milt writhe and he was letting his anger master him. Reading his thought she warned him, her high-pitched voice cracking like a whip.

"Try it! Jest you try it!" she snarled, her finger pressing against the trigger. "Try it, damn ye!"

"Time to go, Milt," yawned Matt. "You can't fight a woman, an' their tongues are hung like a circular saw an' cut all th' way 'round. What you doin' over here, ma'am? Huntin' strays?"

"'Tain't none o' yer business, Ranger! Nobody owns these mountings!" She flung her hand contemptuously toward the great range below. "Their line runs along th' bottom of this ridge, 'tother side of th' crick; an' they don't own half what they claim. I got as much business up hyar as you, an' I ain't goin' to be th' fust to go, neither!"

"That's th' proper spirit, like they has back in Texas," replied Matt. "There ain't so many windjammers back there, I tell you." He watched her closely as he used the nautical term.

"Call things by their right names!" she retorted. "What's a land louse like you know about windjammers?"

Matt looked puzzled but really he was not. To keep her from suspecting his lead, he said: "Mebby yo're right, ma'am. What I meant was blowhards. Why, up here folks don't know how to tie a knot an' call it by th' proper name."

"An' you as much!" snorted Mrs. Peabody.

Matt turned. "Come on, Milt. Give my regards to th' fambly, ma'am, an' tell Dirty Face I aim to wipe off his chin first time I meet him. *Adios!*"

Her face flamed and the rifle went up again; but she hesitated, lowered it, and flashed a glance high above Matt's head. A peculiar look came into her eyes and she laughed, loudly and unexpectedly.

"I'm waitin' fer ye to go," she said sharply.

Matt dropped his sombrero and awkwardly booted it as he stooped to pick it up. When his hand closed on it he was facing the other way, and as he arose his eyes searched the heights. Turning slowly, he let his gaze go out over the low-lying range, and he seemed lost in abstraction as he searched each draw and hillside in turn.

"Come on, Milt; we'll let th' lady shoot her tomater cans by herself." He scratched his head. "Can't believe she did it. Mebby she'll favour us by shootin' it a few times before we go; say three shots clost together?" This was a universal call for help, and it might be answered. He moved over to the south side of a huge bowlder and carelessly leaned against it to be out of the line of any fire from above. Milt had been protected right along from any such fire.

"Want me to use up my ca'tridges, huh?" sneered

Mrs. Peabody with ready wit. "I ain't shootin', an' I ain't stirrin' from here. Git along, both of ye!"

Matt looked down on the range again and his gaze settled on one spot.

"All right; come on, Milt. There's a bunch of cows herdin' in a draw down yonder. Didn't you say they wasn't to herd up so clost to th' canyon? We'll scatter 'em an' ride back th' way we come."

Milt was craning his neck to peer over the rim of the bench in search of the little herd. He nodded and led the way down the steep face of the mountain, Matt going by another route.

Above them Mrs. Peabody stood on the brink of the bench and sneeringly watched them descend, her face flushed with a new anger. She glanced quickly and anxiously up the mountainside to her right and then spat at a bobbing sombrero below.

"No darter of th' Peabody fambly goes 'round kissin' th' men an' gittin' herself talked about," she called, and added a name in exultant venom.

Milt missed his hold, desperately regained it, and went on down, seething with rage. Matt, behind another bowlder, waited for him and, with a low word of warning, led the way on a zigzag course among the rocks of the gentler slope.

"We'll find some cattle an' scatter 'em," he chuckled. "I'm aimin' to spend a lot of my time down here by this canyon." He was grinning reflectively. "I'd 'a' give a dollar if she'd got mad enough to fire them three shots, clost together! An' I'm admittin' she ain't no fool."

"What if she had?" queried Milt. "There'd been enough left in th' magazine."

Matt glanced slyly at him. "Never thought of that," he confessed, and very truthfully. "Reckon I was thinkin' more of wipin' off Dirty Face's chin. Well, it ain't time for that. Come on: we got to find some cows to chase."

Milt shook his head and went after his grazing horse, his grinning companion at his heels.

CHAPTER X

LOYALTY

WHEN Randall Glenn learned of the brawl, he determined to ride to town, carrying a whip instead of a quirt. Agnes's plea to let things remain as they were and not to make them worse was not given the consideration she hoped for. Her uncle was old-fashioned and clung to traditional methods. He took the buckboard whip from its pegs on the gallery wall and swung into the saddle, heading for the corral to get a fresh horse. Agnes followed him part way and then stopped, tears of mortification welling into her eyes; but as she stopped, he stopped, and he looked at the crowd before the bunkhouse door and at the saddled horses at the tie rail.

An atrociously bow-legged puncher waddled from the bunkhouse, finishing certain preparations by wiping the excess oil from a long-barrelled Colt on the sleeve of his red flannel shirt. When Baldy groomed his weapons it was time for thinking men to give heed. He was a character, and the list of his early crimes was not fully known even to those most in his confidence. He was a product of one of the bitterest range wars that ever blazed in the cow-country, a war that dragged its

grisly length for years and piled up an appalling death roll; and it was only because he had redeemed himself in the eyes of his present employer by a display of reckless courage which had saved Glenn and two of his men, and because of his exemplary behaviour during the last few years, that he was allowed to ride for the Hundred Eleven. Randall Glenn knew the cold determination of this one-time killer and he checked his horse to think over Agnes's plea.

He had preached peace to his outfit and had laboured with Baldy on sundry occasions when that puncher thought the honour of the ranch had been trodden on. Now he was starting out to set an example which would make a lie out of all he had told them.

Baldy looked up, saw the ranchman, and slipped the Colt into its sheath with a gesture full of meaning, quickly dropping his ape-like arms to his side. He swung into his saddle and cantered to the ranch owner, his face cold and his eyes frosty. He was looking at the buckboard whip with a vast satisfaction.

"I'm ridin' with you, Boss," he said. "Reb forgot to git th' mail." He ignored the sudden sound of whirling horses behind him, but despite himself there licked into his gray eyes a gleam of pride.

"Wait a minute," said Glenn, and raised his hand and voice to the others.

"Where you boys reckon yo're goin'?" he called.

Reb Ventre pulled up his horse with a movement full of gentle grace and swung about in the saddle. His decorated face was innocent of any expression not compatible with a perfect Christian gentleman. His

voice was soft, his eyes benign, his every movement bespoke peace on earth, good will toward men.

"I was goin' to git th' mail an' buy me a shirt," he answered.

"Why didn't you get th' mail when you was in?"

"Forgot it. There was a ruckus, an' I was so busy tryin' to keep out of it that I plumb forgot th' mail."

"How many men do you need to get the mail and buy a shirt?"

Reb looked aggrieved. "They ain't goin' in to help me buy nothin'," he truthfully answered. "Baldy wants to get a new pair of boots, Slim's pants has wore out so much he's afraid to bend over, an' th' rest all need things. Yestiddy was pay-day, an' if they don't outfit now, some of 'em won't have no money after to-night. An' we got to get a new deck of cards; somebody's been trainin' th' old pack." He glanced at the sober crowd and back to his employer. "If yo're goin' in we'll ride with you. Come on, boys."

Glenn waved them back.

"I'm not going in, and neither are you. Make out a list and I'll see that you all get outfitted and charge it to your accounts." He looked into Baldy's eyes and a smile flickered over his lean, aristocratic face. "The wire's down along Black Gorge. Take a crew and fix it. This cursed rustling worries me."

"Me, too," said Baldy, looking disappointed. There had been no signs of rustling for months. "Reckon it's Bud, or some of them Los Altos bums?"

"That's what I want you to find out, Baldy," answered Glenn, riding on to put up his horse.

Baldy glanced at the long whip and his query was very innocent.

"Lose yore quirt, Boss?"

"No," answered Glenn. "Every time I drive the buckboard I forget the whip. The gallery is no place for it."

Baldy looked calmly after him, rubbed his chin, and turned to his companions.

"Five hundred cows stole off this ranch in gunny sacks," he gravely told them. "Boss says I got to stop it."

Slim grinned. "Which leaves you holdin' th' sack."

"There's more'n me holdin' that sack," retorted Baldy with a vast regret. He looked at Reb. "Yo're due to rustle th' mail day after to-morrow. On that mornin' you stick yore finger down yore throat an' get plumb sick. *I'm* goin' after that mail."

"I love you like a brother," retorted Reb; "but if you do it'll be because you've licked me till I can't sit a saddle. Who you reckon you are, anyhow?"

"Baby of th' bunkhouse," growled Baldy. "Gosh, but I'm gettin' tame! Anybody seen my milk bottle?"

"No; but here's somethin' to cut yore teeth on," offered Black Dan, holding out an eight-inch plug. "Wonder if Milt's heard about all this?"

"That's th' play!" exploded Baldy, coughing up a chunk of tobacco. "Come on; we'll fix that fence at Black Gorge!"

There came a whirling of horses, the five pivoting like one, and where there had been a sorrowful group of punchers was a spreading cloud of dust.

Glenn peered out of the corral gate and watched the whirlwind, cogitating about it with proper suspicion. Gradually the expression on his face changed and became proud and affectionate. He had an outfit that gladdened his heart, and it was needful that he exercise care in the examples he set for it. He sighed and shook his head as he resolutely strode to the ranchhouse. Was he the Randall Glenn that had come from that old Virginia stock? Bits of family history made him wince: was the peace of Los Altos worth what he was paying for it? No, but the lives of his men were worth it. He suddenly clenched his fists, and then relaxed and walked on again, but without that erectness of carriage, that springy step, so well known throughout the county. He entered the house listlessly and dropped on a chair.

Agnes went quickly to him and stroked his silvering hair.

"Thank you, Uncle Randall," she whispered, kissing his cheek. "An armoured knight doesn't feel blunt arrows."

He nodded without conviction and closed his eyes, not at all certain that he was armoured, or that the arrows were blunt.

After a moment Agnes spoke again.

"I'd rather not go on attending church," she said. "I feel that this particular church lacks sincerity. There's something unwholesome about it. It makes me squirm."

"That's a matter for you to decide, Agnes. Bigotry never has the redeeming Christian virtues, narrowness does not point to truth, and no preaching of heaven

and hell can take the place of charity, kindness, and love. I think you are wise."

Outside Sheriff Boulton was dismounting in his characteristic, leisurely manner. He was a man of graceful and deliberate movement, the movement of some great, lazy cat; and it hid a tremendous dynamic energy. He walked to the porch and knocked gently, and as the door opened he swept off his sombrero, the numerous wrinkles on his leathery face wreathing a pair of pale blue eyes a-twinkle with good nature and wholesome affection for the woman who made him welcome.

"How'd do, Miss Agnes?" He searched her eyes and found placidity where he had feared he would find something else. "I'm on my way to Valverde, but never like to pass this way without stoppin'. How's yore uncle?"

"Come in, Boulton," invited Glenn.

"Oh, there you are," said the sheriff. He patted Agnes's shoulder and closed the door behind him. "Young woman, it's an abidin' sorrow with me that I ain't twenty-five years younger. You come over here, an' make it three-cornered."

"What's a little thing like twenty-five years, Uncle George?" she asked, giving him his honorary title. "Uncle Randall wouldn't think half as much about that as he would about you being a Yank."

"An' me bein' a Yank wouldn't bother you a-tall, would it, Agnes?" He touched Randall's knee as he seated himself. "Well, Johnnie Reb, how's th' cattle business?"

Glenn shook his head, but smiled. "You put an end

to one trouble, anyway. There's no more rustling going on."

"Just moved it to Valverde," corrected Boulton. "Ain't none of yore boys seen Bud Skinner lately, have they?"

"No—hold on!" Glenn thought a moment. "There's a new man named Matt Skinner working for me. He said he'd spent a night with Bud—the night before he showed up here. He's out with Milt, on the east line."

"'Nother Skinner!" muttered the sheriff. "Yore line house ain't far out of my way, an' I never like to call without seein' Milt." He grunted pessimistically. "I'm goin' to be a hard-worked sheriff, way things are shapin'. There's a rustlin' mess around Valverde, an' th' no-accounts are gettin' restless up Los Altos way, an' I can't be both places at once. Before I forget it; keep Baldy out of town, an' mebby change yore mail carrier. Reb's full of good intentions, but th' hell that's goin' to be around Los Altos won't need no pavin'. How you fixed with th' bank? They got any notes of yourn?"

"Yes," answered Randall. "I borrowed seven thousand and it's due on the first of the month. Don't know how I can pay it. Prices haven't been good lately, and I won't throw good cattle onto a poor market. They'll renew it, though, as a matter of business. Things will pick up sharply the next year. I'm not worrying about the note."

"Reckon not," agreed the sheriff. "Just th' same, I wouldn't plumb forget about it. Money's awful tight when that bank wants it to be." He arose. "I'd like

to stay longer, but I got a long way to go; an' stoppin' at th' line house only makes it worse. Somethin' shore is rilin' them bums around Los Altos." He clapped his host on the shoulder and turned toward the door, pausing when he was beside Agnes. "Takes a little rumpus to show folks up sometimes, an' peel th' hide off, so we can see what's under it; but I shore would like to know what's stirrin' up Los Altos. You stick to yore job of makin' a good Yank outa Johnny Reb. It'll be hard ridin', but I has great hopes."

She laughed heartily, for this Reb-Yank controversy was a long-standing pleasantry.

"More likely she'll make a Johnny Reb out of Sheriff Boulton," chuckled Glenn, hiding under careless words the disturbing thoughts the sheriff had aroused. "If it wasn't for those twenty-five years there wouldn't be any question about it, at all."

"Yo're shootin' close," laughed Boulton, going out. "Any word you want to send to Milt?"

"Nothing he doesn't know by this time," answered Glenn, recalling the direction in which the outfit had ridden. "Nothing you won't tell him."

Out at the line house it was visitors' day, judging from the evidence. Five horses grazed near the house and five men lolled against it in a shadow that barely covered them. Reb was whittling with a razor-like knife; Baldy, his feet close together and his knees far apart, leaned against the door jamb, forming a figure whose lower part was an oval; Slim was seriously engaged in picking burrs from his shirt-sleeves, and the other two had slumped into grateful inactivity.

"—fan a handful of slugs at some of them bums, damn quick," Baldy was saying, urged by burning loyalty. "I had 'em trained down where I come from, an' I ain't forgot how it's done."

"First you catch yore bum," suggested Slim. "Go on from there, Baldy."

"It's th' bum as goes on from there," corrected Reb, grinning. "Wonder when them two line riders are comin' back?"

"Make you a bet on it," offered Gage, showing a little animation. "Bet you they come back in an hour; or I'll bet you they don't come back in an hour. Take yore choice."

Black Dan glanced sidewise along the line trail and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Lay you ten they're here before then, Harry." He laughed. "Think I just saw 'em."

He was right, and in a few minutes Milt and his companion pulled up and grinned at them.

"Looks like a party," grunted Milt, dismounting.

Baldy's eyes glinted. "It's *any* kind of a party *you* want to make it," he said, waddling from the wall. "Me, personal, favours neckties. What you think about it, Skinner?"

Matt swung to the ground and faced the questioner, grinning. "Don't make no difference. I'm with th' majority."

Milt questioned them, received detailed and truthful answers, and flared a little; but he held himself down and asked another question.

"What's Uncle Rand aimin' to do?" When this was

explained to him with obvious reluctance he shook his head. "What he says, goes. It's hard for us to set back an' swaller it, but it's harder for him. We're all known in town, an' if we make a play it'll mebby set th' county on fire."

Matt lifted his sombrero and gently scratched his head. "I ain't knowed very well, an' I got eyes an' ears. Suppose I ride in to buy me a stick of candy?" He looked at Baldy and grinned exasperatingly.

Baldy swore under his breath. "If you wait till dark, so they wont know me, I'll help you pick out a stick."

Reb burst into laughter. "It won't be dark enough to keep folks from knowin' you, Baldy," he cried, looking with impolite intentness at the bowed legs. "If anybody saw you standin' ag'in a cow, half a mile away, they'd reckon you was th' brand!"

"Th' Wishbone," suggested Matt, chuckling.

As the laughter died Slim spread a warning hand. "Here comes Boulton. Damned if he can't *smell* things out!"

The sheriff rode up and looked pleasantly from one to another, his gaze at last settling on Matt.

"You must be a new man," he said.

Matt nodded. "Am. Name's Skinner."

"Mine's Boulton. I went loco an' let 'em make me sheriff. Skinner ain't a common name in these parts."

"I've heard it ain't popular," replied Matt.

"Worth a lot of money, though," said Baldy, whose name at one time had been worth as much. If the treachery of a companion had succeeded he would have been cashed in for the same round figure.

"Don't happen to know any of th' Skinners of these parts, do you?" asked the sheriff.

"Know Bud Skinner by sight," answered Matt. "Met him a couple days ago an' spent th' night in th' same shack. Didn't know it till after I'd settled down an' had my supper. Knowed him by th' way he jumped when he heard my name."

"Anybody with him?" asked the sheriff casually.

"Yes."

"Who was they?"

"Don't know. I only stayed till after breakfast."

"Didn't they call each other by name?"

"They called each other 'Hey, *you!*'"

"Where was it you stayed with 'em?"

"In a shack on a flat."

"Where 'bouts?"

"Ain't sayin'."

"You ain't sayin'?" repeated the sheriff, surprised.

"No. I was out of grub. They fed me twice. I've said all I'm goin' to."

Baldy sucked in his breath and waddled over to the side of the new member of the outfit, his face grim.

"There's a thousan' dollars on Bud, an' five hundred on any man with him," said the sheriff. "It oughta be easy for you to get it."

"I ain't spendin' that kind of money."

"Don't it mean nothin' that Bud an' them fellers are outlaws?" demanded the sheriff.

"Not till they fool around here," answered Matt.

"An' if they do that?"

"Then I'll mebby get a chance to find out if I'm gun-

shy. Yo're only wastin' time, sheriff. They gave me th' best they had, an' I'm not turnin' 'em over till they make it my business to." He glanced around the circle and found poker faces, but there was a light in Baldy's eyes that warmed him.

"All right, Skinner," said the sheriff. "I was just wonderin' about deputizin' you."

"You can do that," replied Matt quietly. "I'll obey orders best I can; but I got an awful poor mem'ry."

"By God! There ain't nothin' th' matter with mine," muttered Baldy, hitching up his heavy belts. "I ain't forgettin' *this!*"

Boulton smiled at the pair, shook his head in playful bewilderment, and changed the subject.

"Th' snipe-pickers of Los Altos are gettin' restless," he said. "I reckon mebby you boys are bunched up too much. Too bad I got to go to Valverde about some rustlin'; but I'm glad you boys has got so much to do on th' ranch that you won't have no time to ride to town. Milt, don't you lose no sleep over nothin'. Baldy, if you lose any more hair you'll look like a aig. Reb, when you go to town you oughta keep yore mind on th' mail." He pressed his knees against his horse and moved slowly on. As he passed close to Matt he held out his hand. "So-long, Skinner. Proud to know you."

"So-long, sheriff," said Matt, taking the outstretched hand and smiling.

They watched the peace officer until he was out of sight and then Baldy reached for tobacco and papers.

"There goes a good man," he said. "Who's got a match?"

"*Catamaran!*" muttered Matt as the word popped into his mind out of nowhere. Funny he couldn't have thought of it when Milt had told about the cloudburst. "I have, Baldy. Light up an' we'll get that candy." He looked at Milt. "You oughta have a talk with yore sister an' uncle. Let Slim an Reb stay out here till me an' Baldy get back. Sheriff was right: we're bunched up too much." He looked at Baldy through narrowed lids, and one of them dropped slightly. "What *you* think, Baldy?"

"Jest what I was goin' to say," answered the bow-legged killer, hitching up his belts. "We'll get th' mail an' come right back."

Milt nodded, glanced at the other men, and waved them after him. They swept off in a bunch, straight for the long arroyo through which the trail lay.

"What's on yore mind, Matt?" asked Baldy, frosty lights glinting in his eyes.

Matt told them, graphically sketching the happenings of the night. "Milt's young—ain't had no experience. Also, he's a Glenn. You three look purty craggy to me. Milt ain't never killed a man an' he gets flighty. Missed this door six straight, an' it all lit up. Give him ten more years with this bunch an' he'll be good as any, barrin' th' thinkin'. Somebody tied that knot around his neck, an' I'm goin' for th' pole-cat. Wish th' rains would come: they'll cut our work in half."

"What you mean?" asked Slim.

"Figgerin' it was Bud?" queried Reb.

"No, it wasn't," answered Matt. "Tell me about that trouble in Los Altos. Takes a lot of strands to

make a rope, an' single trails to make a road. Tell me this first: Can me an' Baldy get to Los Altos an' back to Glenn's Canyon before midnight?"

"Figger they came through th' canyon?" asked Slim.

"They didn't," answered Matt. "Too much sand. They wanted track-proof goin'." He stepped to the wood-pile where a piece of weather-bleached hemp rope lay against the wall of the house, and he wrapped this around his body, buttoning his coat over it. "Now, then: tell me about that street fight, an' what led up to it."

CHAPTER XI

LETTERS

MATT and Baldy rode as the crow flies for Los Altos. They passed well to the north of the ranch buildings and soon thereafter came across the prints of a horse.

"Pacer," said Matt.

"Named Dawn," explained Baldy. "Belongs to Miss Agnes. She rides near as good as any man on th' ranch."

They topped a rise, dipped down the farther side and climbed another. As they reached the bottom of the second Baldy pulled up.

"Bunch of three," he growled, looking at the prints.

"An' fresh," said Matt. "We don't *have* to go to Los Altos. I only wanted our trail to start some place away from th' ranch."

"None of our boys have been over here this recent," muttered Baldy.

"Sheriff said somethin' about th' bums gettin' restless," suggested Matt. "These riders struck that pacer's trail if they kept on like they was goin'."

Baldy shook his belts. "Better let Los Altos slide for a little. Howard's like a little God to a lot of them bums. It won't take us long: what you say?"

Pete was swung at right angles and started along the fresh trail as fast as he could go in the dry sand, Baldy's mount finding the going more difficult. Half an hour later they came to the joining of the two trails. The prints of the pacer were nearly obliterated by the others. They followed the double trail about two miles, and then Baldy grunted and drew his rifle.

"Reckon so," growled Matt, doing the same. "That pacer fast?"

"Run rings around th' scrubs in this country. Ought to; cost enough."

"They might get close enough to plug it before Miss Agnes knowed what was up," said Matt. "Can that saw-horse of yourn let out another link?"

The saw-horse could, and did, running shoulder to shoulder with Pete, who couldn't understand the sense of racing unless he was allowed to do his best. The sand was getting deep and soft again when they rounded a bend and caught sight of a horse's rump and tail whisking around a bend ahead of them. The tracks suddenly became deeper, and Matt grinned at his hard-faced companion. The riders ahead had just sighted their quarry and were racing to cut down the gap. Pete leaped into his best speed, leaving the indignant cow-pony to reflect on its obvious shortcomings as a racer. Baldy cursed in his throat and used his spurs as his better mounted companion drew away from him.

Pete turned the next bend at an angle of forty-five degrees with the earth, plowing long furrows in the sand as he slid sidewise. He felt the reins fall on his neck and

then his rider's voice roared past his ears. The shout acted on the three ahead like a galvanic cell on a ganglion. There was a sudden spasmodic contraction of the group, followed by a quick separation as the men spread apart to wheel. They reached for rifles, and then they lost their fierceness: Baldy had come into sight. There was not a bum in the country who did not know the truth about this bow-legged killer: the truth and numerous embellishments. They reined in and waited. Beyond them a pinto flash paced up a slope and its rider turned to look back. The pacer stopped, swung around, and looked down into the arroyo, understanding that the race was called off.

"What you doin'?" yelled Baldy, whose trigger fingers itched.

"We but r-ride to thee E-stripe Canyon, Señor," answered the leader, a half-breed.

"Yo're a —— —— lyin' —— ——!" shouted Baldy, exchanging Winchester for the Colt twins. "Take their weapons, Matt!" he snapped, his tense thumbs holding back the hooked hammers. "They're through ridin' for to-day. *Set still!*"

Matt tossed the last captured weapon on the pile and started to unbutton his coat, but stopped when he remembered the rope about his body.

"Get off," he ordered the leader.

"But, señor, I——"

Matt reached up and yanked, his full weight in the surge. The half-breed described a short arc and spat sand. He was jerked to his feet, pushed back an arm's length, and then found himself falling through a black

night, black despite the galaxy of stars streaming in all directions. Baldy grunted at the sound of the blow and pin points of light glinted in his frosty eyes like the sun's rays falling on snow.

"Yo're next, *ladrón!*" snapped Matt, stepping toward a Mexican.

This person instinctively thrust out a foot to hold off the advancing gringo. Matt's hands gripped the ankle and twisted. The Mexican did a backward somersault over the rump of his horse, which kicked an instant too soon. The falling man touched the animal's legs just as they were straightening out and his flight was swift, if short. He rolled over, scrambled to his feet, met Matt's full arm swing and turned a backward flip, losing all interest in the proceedings. Baldy grunted again, even more emphatically.

The third man, a weak-eyed, whiskey-soaked hanger-on of Los Altos' dives, desperate, enraged, did not wait to be singled out, but dived head first for his turning enemy, who stood between him and Baldy's guns. Matt ducked, let the other slide over his back, and whirled. The bum rolled swiftly over and over, Matt following closely. A cactus stopped the rolling and started a spasmodic reverse movement. Matt reached down with both hands, hauled the scratching, cursing man to his feet, and loosed one hand for an instant. Baldy grunted twice in his enthusiasm, and lowered the Colts.

"I allus did admire a man that lost no time," said the two-gun man. "I'm gettin' so I like you, Skinner. Careful with yore language—here comes Miss Agnes!"

He sheathed the Colts and tucked his sombrero under his arm. "How'd'do, Miss Agnes."

"Very well, thanks to you both," she answered, her eyes slowly turning to the calm six-footer. "Yore name must be Matt Skinner," she said, smiling a little.

"It was given to me, Miss," replied Matt, truthfully. He did not explain that her own brother had been the one who unwittingly had bestowed the suspicious name of Skinner on an ex-bullwhacker who never had whacked a bull.

"I'm findin' no fault with it, Matt. Who are these men?"

"Them bums?" asked Baldy. "Don't know, but we'll be able to tell 'em for some time by their new brands. You shouldn't ride so fur from home, Miss Agnes. If you do you oughta go th' other way, over east."

"No!" snapped Matt, glaring at his new friend. "Try south."

"What's th' matter with th' east, Matt?" she asked, watching him closely.

Matt looked reproachfully at Baldy, who was lost in rapt admiration of a near-by cactus.

"Ain't everybody been tellin' me that th' east range is dangerous?" he demanded. "Ain't that what *all* of you been tellin' me, you bald-headed eagle?" He turned to Agnes and sighed helplessly.

"You ain't believin' everythin' *this* outfit tells you, are you?" asked Baldy, grinning.

"Yo're in terrible bad company, Matt," said Agnes,

for the first time in her life finding something the matter with her breathing.

"I discovered that as soon as I reached th' line house th' first night," Matt laughed. "Milt must be an awful trial an' tribulation to his folks."

Baldy choked and brushed dust from his sleeve. To keep from laughing he glared at the nearest bum, who was beginning to move.

Agnes Glenn frowned at the prostrate figures and then let her eyes run up and down the new puncher. She pictured him lying on his side, mischievous deviltry on his face, gravely slamming down Cal Howard's head each time it arose. She had choked with laughter, angry as she had been. This was the first time she had been face to face with him, and she found that she was very much interested in this nonchalant cow-puncher. He radiated confidence and assurance. Then she caught her breath and froze. There had leaped into his eyes a look which leaves no woman untouched. Her breathing quickened and then slowed, and she grew instantly angry with him and with herself; with him because he presumed to give expression to what that look had revealed; with herself because she had thrilled to it and become suddenly weak. Colour poured into her cheeks, she bit her lip, and touched a spur to the pacer, whereupon he climbed straight up in the air. When he settled on all-fours again he was running toward the side of the arroyo.

They watched her until she was lost to sight and then Baldy, flashing his companion a suspicious and envious look, turned his eyes on the bums.

"Them two ain't dead, are they?" he asked.

Matt got hold of himself and came back to earth.

"Not nearly. Mebby I done wrong, thrashin' 'em without askin' 'em more questions?"

"There ain't a thief for miles around that ain't been warned off this ranch," replied Baldy. "They got off easy: *I* couldn't do nothin' with you jumpin' 'round like that. Number two is movin'. Shucks: reckon they're *all* alive." He shook his head and rode after their horses, and when he had caught them and returned, all three of the men were sitting up.

Matt had emptied the captured weapons and was shoving sand and bits of stems down the hammer slots, making them useless until they were taken apart and thoroughly cleaned.

"I'd 'a' let 'em chase 'em themselves," he remarked.

"I'm goin' to let 'em do somethin' just as nice," replied Baldy. "'Tain't more'n a dozen, fifteen miles to town, an' th' walkin' *could* be worse. Climb onto that runnin' fool of yourn an' we'll go get that stick candy." He glared at the sore trio. "You can hoof it. Skinner handled you *this* time, his way; next time *I'll* handle you, Baldy fashion. You won't have time for absolution. *Vamoose!*" He watched them flounder away, and turned to his companion, who was lost in thought, a reverent and wistful expression on his face. "Shake loose, Matt! Thoughts like them ain't healthy, 'though I ain't sayin' I blame you none. We've all had 'em. Come on: get started."

Matt tried to banish the look he had seen in her eyes, and to look carelessly at his companion.

"She's th' very image of a woman I've seen," he said, unabashed, and seemed to have forgotten her; but as he rode along his memory held two faces on the canvas of his mind.

Halfway to town they turned loose the three horses and quickened pace.

Los Altos was not much to look at, but it boasted of a bank, which was a frame structure with forbiddingly thick wrought-iron bars checkering its windows. There were three blocks of frame buildings on the main street, and about them huddled dwellings of wood or adobe which seemed to shoulder tightly together as if for mutual protection. The first building they came to was the adobe jail, which to a superstitious mind might have seemed an evil omen. Baldy flashed it a look of instinctive and professional dislike and led the way to the main street. They dismounted before the post office and went in.

"Hey, Flick!" called Baldy. "Any mail?"

The gray-haired postmaster shifted his cud, scored a bull's-eye at six feet, and pawed around in a box. "Yep! Three letters, two newspapers, an' a patent medicine almanac. There ain't a new joke in it, but it says this is a dangerous month, an' right under that it tells of a hair tonic that'll grow bunch grass on a door knob. They seem to be sorta connected." He glanced meaningly at Baldy and then down at the bundle in his hand. "Here!" he exclaimed, removing a letter from the two newspapers. "I come near makin' a mistake. Cussed if I didn't stick this letter to th' Sheriff of Grant County in th' wrong place." Again he looked at Baldy,

but did not change a muscle of his face. "Some folks believe everythin' they read in an almanac. You got Reb's job?" he asked.

"Not reg'lar," answered Baldy, his lips smiling but his eyes frosty. "You oughta be more careful where you stick out-goin' letters. Th' man that mailed that might 'a' made you dance."

"Reckon not; me an' Cal Howard get along real well. Reb sick?"

Baldy grunted. "No. Too flighty to trust in town these days. Look at th' chance he had to pull trigger an' he used th' butt! Here, meet Matt Skinner."

The postmaster looked, nodded, and let his eyes wander back to the cold, hard face of the two-gun man. He thought things must be moving faster than he had figured when the Hundred Eleven sent in the most dangerous man for miles around. Then he looked again at the other puncher, who was using a pen as a throwing spear, and missing every fly.

"Hey, Skinner! That's government property!" said the postmaster, his eyes on the flying pen.

Matt pulled it out of the wood, examined it, and placed it beside the inkwell full of black mud. "It ain't no worse than it was," he said.

The postmaster looked him over and decided that he appeared to be a fit companion for Baldy. Sending in two gun-men for the mail! His chin whiskers trembled with excitement and he hoped nothing would happen while they were on government property.

A letter slipped from Baldy's hand and Matt picked it up, glancing idly at it as he handed it over. The

post-mark burned into his mind and sent his thoughts rioting.

"Come on, Matt," said Baldy, stuffing the mail into his pockets. "I'm out of chewin'."

"Meet you where you say," replied Matt. "I want to write a letter. This is Wednesday, ain't it?"

"You'll find me three doors down, on this side of th' street."

As Baldy waddled out of the door Matt turned to the interested postmaster. "Gimme couple stamped envelopes an' some paper," he requested, tossing a coin on the window ledge. He took the purchases over to the table and laboured with them. He drew a picture on one sheet and slid it into an envelope, sealed it tightly, and printed the address with care. This he slipped into the second envelope with a short note, sealed it, dropped it into the slot, and wandered out.

The postmaster waited a moment and then pounced on it. "Jerry Hutch, Laramie, Wyo." he read, and felt of the envelope. He was a man of intelligence and experience and he found no puzzle here. This imported gun-man was writing to someone back where he had come from, but was covering his trail by having a friend in Laramie mail the letter. He chuckled, stacked some letters on the table, and reached for the cancelling hammer, filling the small room with swift and regular thuddings. He stopped suddenly, holding the hammer aloft.

"Gosh! Mebby Cal wasn't writin' about Baldy a-tall. Might be this Skinner feller."

Matt had taken a few steps down the street when a

man hurried out of a saloon and barely avoided colliding with him. It was Cal Howard, and he snarled as he stepped back.

"Damn you! I got a notion to bust you in two!"

Matt leaned against the building and crossed his legs. "Suits me. I'm only wantin' an excuse to smear your innards all over th' street."

Howard hesitated, torn by clashing thoughts. "Smearing innards is something we do real well in *this* town!" he retorted.

"I said *I*, not *we!*" grunted Matt, grinning.

"It'll be *I*, and not *we!*" snapped Howard, and turned to walk away. He snarled a curse as he avoided Baldy, who had stepped from the next doorway and seemed to be trying to walk on Howard's new shoes. He glared at the two-gun man, and hurried diagonally across the street toward the bank.

Baldy looked around at Matt and grinned. "You got a damn good nose, Skinner," he commented. "Cussed if you can't *smell* 'em out! Know who *that* is?"

Matt grunted something.

"That's Cal Howard!" laughed Baldy, unconsciously hitching up his belts. "Reb's a plain damn fool." He sighed. "Wish *I'd* been here durin' th' fracas!"

"Reckoned it was him or that Winters feller, seein' th' plum-coloured eye he had," replied Matt. "What you say me an' you pay him a visit, an' tell him his fortune?"

"Can *you* tell fortunes?" demanded Baldy, with keen interest.

"Them kind," grunted Matt.

Baldy cocked his head on one side and critically studied his new friend's face. "Me an' you are goin' to be great friends. I can see that, easy. However, just now we got to hog-tie our soarin' spirits. Th' Ol' Man gave us orders, an' we got to keep our hair slicked for Sunday-school."

"'Tain't much of a job for you," rejoined Matt, looking at his companion's head where it shone below the sombrero.

Baldy ignored the insult. "Cal is shore touchy these days, flarin' up like that because he near run into a stranger."

"Have a drink," invited Matt, turning toward the door Howard had popped out of. "Me an' him don't aim to be strangers forever."

Baldy glanced at the door, hitched his belts again, and followed his friend inside, stepping somewhat after the manner of a hunting cougar. His glance flashed over the long, narrow room, sorting out the mixed crowd, and stopped at last and rested on one man. This person grew nervous under the cold stare and arose, hurrying out of the rear door. Baldy watched the door shut and then stared at another, who also remembered he had business elsewhere. Baldy nudged Matt and singled out another. The same performance was gone through.

"Thus provin' th' power of th' human eye," chuckled Baldy. "What made you pick out this hang-out of cut-throats, Matt? It's th' worst dive in town."

"Then I wandered to it nat'rally," confessed Matt.

He caught sight of a black mark on the bartender's wrist, nearly hidden by the soiled sleeve, and he looked casually into the coarse face with its beady eyes. One of them had a cast in it. "Speak Spanish?" he asked, remembering that Milt had been hung on Tuesday night.

"*Si, señor.*"

"I gotta learn it," growled Matt. "Got to take some lessons. What nights you got off?"

"*Miércoles—Viernes.*"

"Huh?"

"We'nsday—Friday. I no lear-rn you e-spik Espagnole. No haf time, señor."

"All right. Reckon I can find somebody else. Here, have a drink with us—outa th' same bottle, for old time's sake."

The bartender flashed him a suspicious glance and then looked with strong disapproval at Baldy, who was snickering at the fourth man to get up and slouch out; but his disapproval was swiftly ironed out when Baldy glanced at him.

"Hey, Matt," said the two-gun man. "We ain't in no hurry, are we?"

"We are," answered his companion. "Didn't Glenn tell us to get right back an' not do no fightin'?" He looked at the white liquor in his glass and scowled at the bartender. "I don't want gin," he objected.

"No ees geen, señor; ees wheesky. White wheesky, from thee wheat. *Está bueno.*"

"Well, we ain't done no fightin', have we?" demanded Baldy. "That's whiskey, Matt. Sheriff would

like to know where it comes from. All these dives sell it."

"We ain't done none, yet," retorted Matt, putting down the empty glass; "but we mebby will, if you don't stop testin' th' power of th' human eye. Postmaster said this was a dangerous month, an' *I*'m sayin' there ain't *no* tonic that'll grow bunch grass on a bald head that's dead. Ever seen any knife throwin'? Drink that rotten likker an' come on. I got somethin' good to tell you."

Baldy's eyelids flickered a little at this repeated coupling of what the almanac was supposed to have said about bald heads and dangerous months, but he raised his glass, noticing that as he reached for it his companion had turned indolently and looked around the room, his right hand draped on the edge of the bar just above the walnut handles of his six-gun. A pleasurable glow went over Baldy, and it was not entirely due to the potent liquor. His big, observant companion was winning his respect more and more with each passing minute.

"I'm all ears," said Baldy, sliding the glass along the bar.

"Which is somethin' you ain't alone in," retorted Matt. "'Tain't nothin' to get swelled up about." He rang a coin on the bar, waved a quitclaim to any change, and walked to the door, where he turned and held it open from the outside, grinning at Baldy and the bartender. This courtesy solved the question, for Baldy, of how to make an unsuspicious but alert exit, and he walked forward, his swaggering

back to the restless and scowling remnant of the crowd.

They mounted in silence and cantered down the street, turned into the trail leading to the ranch, and then Baldy spoke.

"I'm alone in it *now*," he suggested. "What's th' good news?"

CHAPTER XII

THE NOOSE

"KNOW how to tie a hangman's noose?" asked Matt, abruptly.

Baldy stiffened. "This yore good news? Sounds more interestin' than it does good."

"Ever see one?" persisted Matt, ignoring the remark.

"Just what you mean, Skinner?" asked Baldy in a very low voice.

"Nothin' to make yore voice sound like that, Baldy. If you can tie that kind of a noose, that's th' kind we want. If you can't, we'll throw some other kind. Can you?"

"Listen here, Skinner," said Baldy, looking his companion fairly in the eyes. "I got th' reputation of bein' hard as hell, an' I reckoned I earned it; I'm beginnin' to figger yo're a damned sight harder. Who are you, an' what are you doin' down here?"

"Can't tell you now; but I will some day. Nobody on th' Hundred Eleven has got any reason to worry about me, you least of all. I've been sizin' you up for myself, an' I don't give a cuss what you did in Grant County. Th' question is: can you tie that noose?"

"Hum!" said Baldy, reflectively. "A man's got to

back his own judgment. I'm backin' mine, you long-headed maverick. I can tie that noose—or I could once. I was a deputy sheriff in a little corner of hell."

"It's tough how things will break," growled Matt, opening his coat and beginning to unwind the hemp rope from about his waist. "Here I was figgerin' on you strong; *countin'* on you, an' things gettin' tighter an' tighter all th' time. Now you'll mebby have to take to th' hills an' hole up just when I need you most. How are we goin' to get hold of that letter?"

Baldy's face nearly split from the grin. "Gosh! When you want a think you shore believe in gettin' it! That's U. S. Mail now. We ain't goin' to get it a-tall. What makes you reckon I'm takin' to th' hills, an' that things are gettin' tighter an' tighter? What things?"

"Well," said Matt, apologetically, "seein' th' postmaster was so dead anxious to let you know about Cal writin' to th' sheriff of Grant County I got to thinkin'. I claim it was a nat'ral thing to do. As for things gettin' tighter, I can feel it all about me. Any fool can set down an' read his'try after it's writ, but th' wise man tries to figger what's goin' to be writ long before a word is set down. Here's th' rope: make a big noose."

Baldy laughed, his voice ringing, and placed a quick, tight hand on his companion's arm. Matt did not know it, but this little movement was the sign that Baldy had adopted him for a blood-brother.

"I ain't worryin' much about Grant County. If I has to hole up there won't be many offerin' their services with th' posse, or gettin' far into th' hills. Hope

I ain't forgot th' reg'lar Grant County noose. You ain't told me what yo're aimin' to do with it."

Matt chuckled. "Different folks raise hell in different ways. Me, bein' a cow-puncher, oughta raise mine by stickin' sand burrs under saddles. That allus makes excitement." He shook his head in pretended sorrow. "It's plumb wore out, Baldy; wore all to pieces. Tyin' cans to dogs' tails is also wore out. Ain't that so?"

Baldy remained discreetly silent, but there was a hopeful look on his face.

"Now, thinks I, nobody's ever raised hell with a hangman's noose; that is, not in fun, Baldy. But me an' you ain't like other people. Are we?"

Baldy frowned from the strain of his concentration. "W-e-l-l, I reckon mebby we're a *mite* different, *some* ways. Go on, Skinner. Who's this here excitement goin' to hit?"

"Quite a few folks. Me an' you, mebby."

Without thinking, Baldy shook his holster, gripped his knees a little tighter, and then grunted: "Turn her loose; I'm ready. But you ain't told me nothin' yet; who'd we try it on?"

Matt explained the matter as he watched the clumsy fingers fashion the great knot and, discussing their mission from all angles, they turned from the trail and struck cross-country straight from Glenn's Canyon, passing well to the north of the ranch. Long before they reached it a hangman's noose was carefully wrapped in Matt's rolled slicker behind the cantle of the saddle.

Twilight changed into darkness swiftly, some reason for it owing to the great bank of black clouds which rolled up over the horizon and snuffed out the huge red sun. They sent their horses into a dead run and raced the coming storm to the canyon, crossing the sandy oval as the first drops fell. The wind roared about their ears and shrieked in the canyon, clouds of gray-white dust and the finer sand streaming above their heads.

"It's a gamble, Matt!" yelled Baldy in his companion's ear. "I'm warnin' you!"

"It's what we need!" shouted Matt. "If we can get back to th' line house before th' rain stops there won't be no doubt a-tall when we get our answer. Any fool could hang it on us if he could track us; but if he *can't* track us, an' blames us *just th' same*, it'll tell me what I'm fair itchin' to know. Take th' lead: you know th' way."

All the devils of hell seemed to be loose in that stone chasm. Rocks dropped from the heights, shattering into pieces with a report at times not heard above the diabolical symphony of a wind gone mad. Lightning flung swift pictures of the rock-strewn bottom into eyes nearly blinded by the almost constant glare. Thunder smashed against their aching ear-drums, one long crashing roll as the canyon toyed with the reverberations until the sound of one crash merged into that of the next. Their mounts were quivering with terror, and it took all their strength to hold the animals to their racing stride with some sort of direction where a blindly running horse would kill itself and rider in two jumps.

Bad as this was, the greater threat lay behind them somewhere. In their minds they could see it speeding along, although the rain had ceased in the canyon; see it spurting up among the bowlders, boiling, hissing, spreading, climbing, a wall of muddy water flinging drift over its vicious crest. Back on the range they believed it to be raining in a steady, roaring downpour.

Matt realized that he was being whisked around an abrupt bend, and a glance above let him see the dark laminations of the wall during a flash of lightning. He was in Striped Canyon and the wind had eased. He fought Pete to a slower pace, and soon overtook Baldy, who had adopted a more heroic method with his horse. As Matt managed to stop at his side the two-gun man let loose of his horse's nostrils, abandoning a feat of horsemanship not to be attempted by a tyro. Matt's amazement was full tribute; no man but a human wishbone with arms like those of an ape could have done that trick. Baldy had gripped the barrel of the horse with his vise-like misshapen legs, pulled the animal's head around with one huge, abnormally long arm, and closed the whistling nostrils with his other hand. The horse stops short or suffocates.

"Good Lord, Baldy!" he cried. "I never saw that before!"

"Nature played a dirty trick on me, Matt, but I ain't overlooked no part of it. Th' wind don't get us so strong here, an' I figger no rain's fell on this side of th' ridge. After we get outa here an' climb out of th' crick bed there won't be no danger from water. Wish th'

lightnin' would quit: it's served our purpose, an' lighted us through all them bowlders in the canyons."

They left the chasm and climbed the bank of the creek, stopping behind a huge pile of rocks to wait for less illumination, which steadily decreased. At the end of an hour Baldy held out his hand.

"Gimme th' noose; I don't stick up in a saddle as plain as you."

"They'd know you at a glance," said Matt. "I picked th' play an' I ain't passin' it on. Reckon we better ride to th' other side of th' house, in case we have to move fast. Damn th' luck; by rights it oughta be rainin' buckets!"

They heard a muffled roar behind them and spurred past the pile of rocks in one movement, Baldy leading straight for the creek bed. This they followed halfway below its rim until well past the house, the rising water sucking at the hoofs of their mounts. Matt followed his companion up over the bank and dismounted, handing over his reins. Fumbling a few moments at his slicker roll, he refastened the tie strings and disappeared in the dark.

A light sprang up in a window of the house, a pin point until the match touched the wick of a lantern, and Baldy cursed as he drew both six-guns. The roar of the backing water surging up the creek had awakened one of the Peabody family. Because old age sleeps lightly, this person was likely to be the grandfather. The light threw a grotesque shadow against the inner wall of the room, and Baldy saw that it was the grandfather who passed the window, which darkened as the one in

the next room sprang into yellow prominence. He leaned forward in the saddle, tensed for the opening of the outer door, both guns nearly shoulder high for the deadly drop. If he couldn't smash the lantern with twelve shots he'd go to herding sheep. The door did not open, but a prodigious hammering awoke the echoes and sent them tumbling through the valley. Then, all at once, a flash of lantern light sprang into the darkness, died instantly, and all was dark again. Running steps neared him, screamed curses at the house awakened a bedlam of yells and shrieks, and flashes of spiteful fire stabbed, hit or miss, into the night.

"Here!" called Baldy's low, vibrant voice, and a moment later a shape materialized as it leaped out of the night and scrambled into the empty saddle. The horses whirled, their forehoofs aloft, and sprang into instant flight. Then came the deluge, blotting out all other sounds. The springing lightning was no more than a vast, sickly, luminous wink; shouts and shots behind them abruptly ceased in the crashing downpour, and the two riders found themselves shut into a world of their own, a world no greater across than the length of their floundering horses.

Matt leaned sidewise, his mouth close to his bowed companion's ear. "Somebody wanted that door awful bad while I was holdin' it shut. Soon as I was ready I gave it to him, *hard*. Him an' th' lantern did a flop an' he didn't have time to recognize me. Th' whole house was up then. From now on mebby every little thing will tell us somethin'."

"I'll take off my hat to you—when it quits rainin',"

shouted Baldy. "It's a dead shore cinch there won't be no tracks to tell 'em anythin'." A roar of laughter burst from him. "I'd give a month's wages to see that fambly when they discover that noose hangin' down in front of their door! Bet you th' Bank of England agin' th' Union Pacific Railroad there's goin' to be some sleep lost in that house."

Back at the Peabody domicile there was slavering rage and a thrill of fear. Obadiah, leaping for the door, stumbled over his prostrate father, tripped, and plunged through the opening; but he did not fall. Something slapped his chest and shoulders and jammed his Adam's apple toward the back of his mouth and he felt himself held from falling. Grabbing frantically with both hands, he tore desperately at it, trying to hold it away from his throat while he struggled to regain his footing, at the same time yelling in a choked voice for help and a light, which at that moment his wife was bringing. To her amazement and horror she saw her husband with an unquestionable hangman's noose about his neck, and for the first time in her adventurous and hard-boiled life she fainted dead away, the lamp falling on the head and whiskers of the groping father-in-law.

Shiftless as the Peabody family was reputed to be, it could not at this moment be truthfully accused of inaction. Everybody had several things to do at once and was trying to do them between shots into the dangerous night; but complex activities in such darkness lead to distress, and no one cared to light another lamp until the door had been closed and bolted and the shutters slammed shut.

CHAPTER XIII

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

IT WAS still raining when Matt and his companion reached the line house. Baldy went in, awakened Slim and Reb, and spoke the piece he had been told to speak.

"We're goin' on to th' bunkhouse, figgerin' on th' rain washin' out our tracks. Ride th' north end of th' line, speak if yo're spoke to, an' keep yore eyes an' ears open. Don't go if it's rainin' when you start. Yore clothes have got to be dry. Hear that? They've got to be dry. You been all alone here since yesterday afternoon, when me an' Matt went to town. You ain't seen us since. If our tracks show, then be frank an' truthful about us bein' here *all night.* We was *both* here all night if th' tracks show." He grinned. "They won't. So-long."

"Hey!" called Reb, sitting up in the bunk. He heard only the spat of the rain and, snuggling back into the blankets, he sighed happily and went to sleep again.

The two riders chose the arroyo because it was knee deep with water, and splashed along in the dark, Baldy chuckling as he reviewed the activities of the night; Matt, lost in abstraction. He had made a line fast and

might feel a twitch at any time; now he wanted to get a reaction from another direction. The cook carelessly had said that Chet Taggart, the foreman, was a great friend of Cal Howard. Just how far the foreman would go for this friendship remained to be found out.

"Baldy," said Matt, "think hard. Is there any man in th' outfit that you ain't dead shore is loyal to th' ranch? Don't tell me now. Think it over careful an' tell me before we get to th' bunkhouse. One thing I'm shore of: we should 'a' made them three bums talk before we let 'em go. Fired an' blistered 'em if we had to. We missed a big play."

A little later he swore in vexation at the wild jumble in his mind. "Baldy, was Long Jack a coward?"

"We figgered he was anythin' but a coward till he left like he did," growled Baldy. "Didn't even stop to say good-bye."

"Didn't even collect his wages, huh?"

"No, he didn't—hold on!" replied Baldy. "Strikes me we was all paid th' day before he left. Yes; I'm shore of it. I owed him a poker debt, an' so did a couple of th' others. I remember now, because we all joked an' said it was too bad he didn't pull stakes before we could pay up."

Matt chuckled. "What'd his friends say about it?"

"Chet was sore as a boil an' called him all kinds of names. Him an' th' foreman was real thick, an' it sorta made Chet look bad. Th' rest of us was just plain disgusted."

"I want you to talk about th' rustlin' when we all

are together in th' bunkhouse. Talk about th' rustlin', Long Jack, Cal Howard, an' th' bums chasin' Miss Agnes. Shoot off yore mouth like a shot-gun, an' don't leave Bud Skinner out. Tell me this: Can we count on Reb an' Slim, *solid?*"

"Till hell freezes. I know 'em like I know myself. Th' Ol' Man has near raised 'em. They was orphants an' he took 'em out of Los Altos an' brought 'em up. Never had no children of his own, an' since his wife died he's been shore lonesome. Milt an' Miss Agnes has helped to stop that, but before they come he was fatherin' Reb an' Slim." He grunted. "Rand Glenn is th' whitest man I ever knew. Gave me a square deal when nobody else would. I'd just about cut a throat for him, an' so would Reb an' Slim. You was askin' me how we'd get that letter Cal sent. Seein' it was about me, I let it go. I ain't robbin' no mails for myself. If it had been about th' Ol' Man, aimin' to do him harm, three men from this outfit would 'a' took it off th' stage so damned quick it would 'a' looked like an act of God. That's flat."

"Bless yore spotted soul!" said Matt, squeezing his companion's shoulder, an action which Baldy interpreted in his own way and according to what such an action meant to him.

"What's on yore mind, Matt?" he asked. "Somethin's hatchin' under yore hat; what is it?"

"Don't know yet," growled Matt. "It's mixed up an' millin'. Somethin' tells me that rotten things are goin' on around this ranch. At first my interest was that of a curious puncher, workin' for wages. I'm th'

most curious man you ever saw. Now an' henceforth there's a bigger reason spurrin' me on. That's my secret, but if you got th' brains of a chaparral cock it won't take you long to guess awful close."

"Huh! W-e-l-l, as long as you ride straight an' play straight there ain't nobody got no business cuttin' in where they ain't concerned. Soon as you forget to ride straight there's three of us that'll make it our business to cut in; an' we'll cut strong an' deep, come hell or high water."

"We'll cut straight, deal straight, an' play straight," said Matt. "Tell me this: Milt said somethin' about not losin' as many cows in dry weather as we do in wet. Glenn's Canyon makes that sound funny. What you think about it?"

"We figger th' rustlin' has stopped since Bud Skinner has been scared away from this part of th' county," answered Baldy. "That's Milt's idea, us losin' more cows in wet weather. Chet says he's wrong. Th' rest of us don't know. How can we, when it's only at round-up that we can figger losses an' gains?" He shook his head. "We've all took turns watchin' th' canyon an' there ain't no cows bein' drove through it. Their tracks would show in dry weather, an' they couldn't be drove through when th' canyon's flooded."

"What about that letter Howard wrote yesterday? Anybody got anythin' on you?"

"Bank robbery that I never done," growled Baldy.

Matt stiffened. It was the very crime he had been accused of.

"Can you stand trial?"

"Not while Grant County politics is like what it is now. I was on th' wrong side, fightin' th' gang in power. I've quit fightin', temporary. When I dast go back an' stand a fair trial I'll be sent for. When that time comes there'll be a lot of thieves bustin' all records for runnin'."

"That's funny: we're both wanted for th' same thing," said Matt. "I can see th' bunkhouse."

"There ain't nobody in this outfit I don't trust," growled Baldy. "Lord, but I'm wet!"

The cook was stirring about the kitchen when they dismounted at his door and devilled him for hot coffee. Being a cook, he felt he could take liberties, and his language would have melted copper. They backed against the far side of his stove, steaming up the room, and grinned at him.

Chet Taggart entered through the bunkroom door and scowled at them. "Heard you had trouble with some bums yesterday," he said.

"Some bums had trouble with us," replied Baldy, turning to steam his other side. "If we ketch any more of 'em runnin' races with Miss Agnes there'll be some dead ones for th' vultures."

"That's th' stuff. What brought you in so early? Any trouble on th' line?" A hint of worry flashed in his eyes.

"Only Reb an' Slim, which is a-plenty. We come in to find out what you want us to do. Heard anythin' about any more rustlin', or about Bud Skinner actin' up?"

"Long as Bud don't act up there won't be no rustlin',"

replied the foreman. "Ain't no use of havin' four men loafin' out east. When you go back, tell Reb an' Slim to ride in."

"Milt told 'em to stay there," said Baldy.

"An' I'm tellin' you to send 'em in," retorted Taggart. "Wait a minute; you better stay around here, where I can find you in a hurry in case I need you. Skinner can stay with Reb an' Slim. Reckon three of you ain't too many, after what happened to Milt."

Matt nodded, wondering at the peculiar expression on the foreman's face. "Reb said we oughta watch Glenn's Canyon real close," he suggested, which would have caused Reb no end of surprise. "Them greasers might come back ag'in."

"Greasers!" snapped the foreman with unnecessary heat. "Nobody on this ranch but me ever thinks of anythin' but greasers! *I'm* not thinkin' greasers! I'm thinkin' Bud Skinner. Th' feller you shot that night, was *he* a greaser?"

"No," muttered Matt.

"Milt said th' fellers that strung him up was greasers," objected Baldy, obeying previous instructions.

"Milt's a nice boy; but nothin' but a boy," rejoined the foreman.

"Sheriff said th' Los Altos bums are gettin' restless," suggested the two-gun man.

"He dreams of Los Altos bums," sneered Taggart. "If he'd get Bud an' his gang he wouldn't need to worry about no bums."

"Me an' Matt had a scare yesterday," said Baldy, turning again. "Cal Howard bumped inter us an'

chased us outa town. I'm goin' to take him apart some day an' see what's in him."

The foreman scowled and turned to go back into the bunkroom.

"That Cal spends a lot of money for a spavined lawyer," chuckled Matt, covertly watching the foreman's cheek, and flashed his glance at the stove as Taggart faced about.

"His father's president of th' bank," explained Taggart. "I never heard he spent much money."

"Likker costs a lot, an' he's full of it," snickered Matt. "It fair swashes round in him when he moves sudden, like he did yesterday. Him an' me is goin' to have a innards-strewin' contest, no holds barred. Bring a mop an' come see it."

Taggart's gaze was cold and steady, searching Matt's innocent eyes.

"You oughta lick him easy; yo're big enough," said the foreman. "I'm backin' you when it starts. How you bettin', Baldy?"

"All I want is to hold th' stakes an' have th' lend of th' pacer," laughed Baldy.

The foreman went back into the bunkroom and they heard him routing out the two lazy punchers. Baldy felt of his clothes and went in after him, Matt following.

"Hello, Wishbone," called Harry Gage. "Get that stick candy?"

Black Dan swore, and reached swiftly. "Hey, Gage; that's *my* sock!"

"Gage, you an' Dan take th' west section after breakfast," ordered Taggart from the door.

"Tell us about Miss Agnes an' th' race," urged Gage, and dressed while he listened. After its conclusion and after the remarks about it had ceased, he asked an idle question. "Skinner chase you away from th' line, Matt?"

"Sent in word he was aimin' to rustle a small bunch pretty soon an' didn't want to hurt nobody," answered Matt, grinning, "like he did Long Jack," he added.

"Awful thing he did to Long Jack," said Gage, taking off his hat to put on his shirt. The hat went back again. "Jack was hurt terrible."

Matt flashed Baldy a warning look and held Black Dan's eyes. "Must 'a' been," he admitted. "Gosh, but this cook's slow." He wondered how Gage knew anything positive about Long Jack's hurts, since that person had left without saying good-bye. According to Milt he had left a note and disappeared. "You reckon Bud's been doin' all th' rustlin'?" he asked.

Gage nodded. "Shore."

"It's a toss-up between Bud an' th' bums," said Black Dan, yawning. "Mebby them coyotes you an' Baldy laid out yesterday was scoutin' with rustlin' in their minds before they come to Miss Agnes's trail."

"Wrong, as usual," said Baldy. "I'm figgerin' it's th' postmaster an' th' president of th' bank that's been doin' all th' cow liftin'."

"Go to hell," said Black Dan. "Got th' mail? Anythin' for us?"

"Couple newspapers," said Baldy, plastering the pulpy mass on his friend's face.

"I'll throw it away!" yelled the cook, and his words caused a stampede.

After breakfast Matt and Baldy sauntered out to the corral and the former, stirred by vague forebodings, looked earnestly at his companion while he considered. He made up his mind suddenly, and spoke.

"How long will it take for an answer to come from Grant County?"

"Three, four days. Worryin' 'bout that?"

"Near sick. When th' time gets close you find a place where you can see anybody ridin' up here," said Matt. "When you see a bunch, you streak for th' line house, an' over th' ridge. Twice a day, daylight an' evenin', watch for signals from th' house. When you run out of grub I'll get some to you. Here, remember these," and he arranged a simple set of signals.

Baldy was grinning. "You shore allus look on th' dark side of life."

"My brains are gettin' scrambled," said Matt, rubbing his head. "I been beat out of a trick by you havin' to hang around here. I don't know what to think a-tall."

"You been doin' right smart, considerin'," chuckled Baldy.

"How would stolen cattle be got out of this section?" asked Matt, suddenly. "Have to stick to certain trails, or could they go 'most any way?"

"Certain trails for th' first fifty miles," answered Baldy. "Aimin' to start a herd?"

"You got some mail you oughta deliver," said Matt. "If yo're bashful, I'll take it to th' house."

"Here," said his companion, handing over the packet. "I'd wait, if I was you, till they're outa bed an' had somethin' to eat. Here comes Chet. If he sees that mail you won't get a chance to deliver it."

Matt's coat moved gently and his hands were empty when the garment settled back.

The foreman stopped beside them while Baldy, his thoughts elsewhere, lowered the bars of the corral and passed in, swinging his rope. He cut out the horse he wanted and soon had a saddle on it.

"You'd think he could climb 'em, goin' in," said Taggart, looking at the bars.

"Scared of bendin' his laigs crooked," suggested Matt.

Taggart laughed. "I'm goin' to town to get a new part for th' forge," he said. "Better set a pair of new posts in place of them bad ones in th' corner over there, Baldy. An' you," turning to Matt, "go back to th' line house an' help 'em to watch Glenn's Canyon." He whirled his mount and loped away, whistling.

"Where's th' forge, Baldy?" asked Matt.

"In th' shed, you fool," retorted Baldy. "Chet knows his job, all right. That canyon is th' one thorn in our side."

Gage and Black Dan sauntered up, shook out the coils of their ropes, and climbed down the other side of the bars which Baldy had just replaced. The little herd started milling again, and they fixed their eyes on their selections, swearing at the instinct warning those particular animals that this was their day to work. Matt was following the side of the corral toward the

blacksmith shop a score of paces distant. He returned to find the two men saddling.

"Chet said a couple of posts oughta be set, over there in th' corner," said Baldy, innocently pointing with careful exactness.

"Did he?" asked Gage, a slight frown on his face, settling in the saddle.

"We might set th' wrong ones," said Black Dan, grinning. "Come on, Gage, before these coyotes find somethin' for us to do."

Baldy waddled out of the dust cloud and looked after them reproachfully.

"There go a couple of ingrates," he said, smiling. "After all I've showed 'em about poker, too."

"Gage is a mite touchy, ain't he?" asked Matt.

"Has been a little that way lately," answered Baldy.

"Watch yore chance when th' cook ain't settin' on th' supplies," said Matt. "Cache grub enough to last you a week." He looked toward the ranchhouse and nodded. "Well, th' Boss is out of bed, anyhow."

"He'll take th' mail from you," said Baldy. He looked down at his horse's legs, got off, and felt of the off front knee. "Somebody's rode this cayuse plumb careless. An' I'm gettin' careless pickin' 'em." He swung down, stripped off the riding gear, and turned the animal loose to wander where it would. "They shouldn't wrangle a cayuse like that." He looked over the impounded horse herd for the best remaining animal, whereupon a piebald flattened its ears and squirmed into the centre of the group. "Cuss you for a mind reader," growled Baldy, but he grinned.

Matt was looking at him reproachfully. "Th' rules for th' delivery of mail on this ranch says ladies first. I'm surprised at you."

"Lookit that blasted piebald," replied Baldy, straddling the top bar and trying to hide the rope behind his back. "Him an' me are goin' to have a hell of a time startin' now." He dropped awkwardly to the ground. "Ain't you never goin' to ride no cayuse but that runnin' fool of yourn?"

"Not till I has to," answered Matt. "Pete knows as much as you."

"Which ain't no recommend either way. Come on, Paint: get out where a man can have a chance!"

"Look out he don't dive between yore laigs," warned Matt, but sudden action had taken all his companion's attention and Baldy was too busy to retort to the insult. In a few minutes the piebald quivered and stood stock still, and in a few minutes more Baldy was putting up the bars behind the saddled animal. He mounted and leered at his smiling friend.

"Slick yore hair, an' be shore to take off yore hat," he said. "So-long, you Siwash!"

Matt growled something and his colour deepened. He watched Baldy ride off and then went over to loaf around the cook shack, where he made himself at home against the door.

"Shoot any more of them pizen toads?" queried the cook, fishing a greasy plate out of the steaming dishwater. He tossed it from hand to hand, wiping it a little each time he caught it.

"That's all right," reproved Matt in an aggrieved

voice. "Let one of 'em bite you, an' you'll find out."

"Shucks! I've had a Gila monster bite me," boasted the cook.

"No accountin' for tastes," grunted Matt.

The cook turned the remark over in his mind and flashed his companion a suspicious look. "It bit my pants," he confessed.

"Which died?"

"Huh?"

"Did it die?"

"Shore. I killed it. Missed its head an' hit its tail. Damned if it didn't shuck that tail an', run off without it. Then I shot it."

"It didn't bite yore pants," said Matt, thoughtfully. "You ain't got over it yet. Who busted th' forge?"

"Nobody—it was all right last evenin'," answered the cook, fishing up another plate and juggling it expertly. "Kinda tough, ain't it, when a man's job makes him go again' an old friend that he owes money to."

"I don't owe you no money," replied Matt, pricking up his ears.

"You ain't goin' to," declared the cook. "I hears you whaled hell outa three bums yesterday. I ain't got th' right of it yet."

"You will some day," replied Matt. "It shore is hard when friends get on th' opposite side of th' fence. What you think about it?"

"I'm thinkin'," answered the cook. He stirred the cutlery in the bottom of the pan and scooped up a knife.

"Don't never have to wash no forks, which is somethin' to be thankful for. Milt had a close call, didn't he?"

"I hope he never has another as close," said Matt, scowling.

"Who you think done it?"

"I'm thinkin'," said Matt, stretching.

"Too bad it was that friend of yourn that got bit by th' man-eatin' toad," said the cook.

"Too bad you had yore pants on," countered Matt. "Anybody stirrin' up at th' ranchhouse?"

The cook looked out of the window. "Boss is just goin' back in. That means Miss Agnes is settin' down to breakfast. How'd you an' Baldy get so wet?"

"Rain," answered Matt.

The cook snorted. "Look out or you'll be confidin' in me," he warned.

"Now I'm shore that Gila got more than pants," retorted Matt, and he and the cook passed time very pleasantly; but their sprightly conversation ceased abruptly when the latter, glancing out of the window, announced that Miss Agnes was walking toward the corral.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Matt, leaping to his feet. "An' I done forgot these letters! So-long, you flat-head."

They reached the corral at the same time and Matt, sombrero in hand, gave her the letters and stepped back.

"You must 'a' got terribly wet," she said, looking at them in surprise.

"We did," he replied. "Sorry they're in such bad shape."

"Mind if I read this one?" she asked, and at his

answer she tore open the envelope whose post-mark had burned itself into Matt's mind. "It's from my mother," she explained, in apology as she began to read. Her face gradually acquired a look of suspicion and doubt and for a moment she studied the paper in abstraction.

"Anythin' wrong?" he asked.

"I wish I knew. It's th' same story. Every letter is full of it; but I'm no nearer believin' it now than I was when I got th' first news of it." She put the letter back into the envelope for her uncle and her brother to read. "Matt, can a leopard change his spots?"

"Depends on th' leopard an' his reason for changin' 'em, I reckon. Love will change a man; so will fear. Get a man scared enough an' he'll do 'most anythin'. Question is, will th' spots *stay* changed?"

She looked him in the eyes for a full half minute, puzzled, trying to read him; and flushed at something she had not expected to read.

"Matt, my brother says yo're th' smartest man he ever knew; but smartness don't explain everythin'; can you read my mind?" she asked, half in jest, half in earnest.

"I'd give my chances for a future life if I could do that, Miss Agnes."

"You said fear or love," she said, hurriedly. "We'll leave th' love out of it altogether, an' take fear. Do you believe that fear can change a man's habits of a life-time, his waking and sleeping thoughts, th' very fibre of his being?"

"I once heard a man say that opposites, if carried far

enough, became th' same thing. Fear is th' opposite of love, a great fear th' opposite of a great love. I *know* that th' last will do th' things you just said; therefore I'm bettin' th' other will, too."

"Do you know where this letter came from, Matt?"

He craned his neck, looking at the envelope. "Griggs" he read. "Ferry? Yore thumb's over th' rest of it."

"Th' second word begins with 'V'."

"That's th' third letter of th' word I been thinkin' about. I give it up, Miss Agnes." She drew back and turned to go, but he checked her with a word. "I want to ask you somethin'," he said as she paused. "I ain't askin' just out of curiosity, but because I reckon I got a lot of reasons for it. Th' worst of it is, I can't tell you what they are, yet awhile."

"You are a most remarkable man, Matt. My brother has a very high opinion of you," she replied. "He and all of us owe you a big debt. I owe you and Baldy another. Milt says you have th' brains of th' devil an' th' second sight of an angel. Those are his words, an' I'm tempted to make them mine. Without question you saved his life at no slight risk; and you knew what to do an' when to do it. Baldy sticks to you like a tick to a cow, which is another endorsement. Any question you ask me, if it is not impertinent, which it will not be, will get th' best answer I can give. What is it?"

"You got any idea why them fellers chased you?"

"Several popped into my mind, but they all seemed crazy. Have you?"

"My head's whirlin' with 'em. Was you ever bothered like that before?"

"To the contrary; an' I'll see that I ain't again."

"What does yore uncle, an' Milt, think about it?"

"Uncle hasn't said. He just sits an' thinks an' worries. Milt is as much in th' dark as I am. What do you think?"

"If I told you, you'd reckon I'm loco. I want to have somethin' better than I've got now before I say anythin' out flat." He scratched his head. "Humans are hard to understand. Animals think mostly along one groove because they can't get out of it. There ain't no tellin' how a human will think, or what he'll do on impulse. There's a lot of ways for him to choose. But I'm tellin' you this much: if anythin' unpleasant happens to you, there's one man I'm aimin' to kill as soon as I can get in gun-shot of him."

"That's my brother's duty," she retorted, stiffening.

"I'm borrowin' it. Thanks for bein' frank with me. I'm ridin' back."

She nodded, and stood to watch him saddle Pete and ride away, nodded again as he raised his hat and then sent Pete into a lope. She was piqued, surprised, nonplussed. When he had become a dot on the range she read the letter again, frowning with disbelief. Her father could play a part with her mother, but he could not fool her. She believed that he was playing a game, deeper than any he ever had played before; or had been touched by God's own hand; and she had small faith in miracles outside the Bible. She laughed bitterly and turned toward the house, to let others read the letter

and to air their regular opinions, aired many times before. And there was another letter, in the bank's envelope: it disturbed her greatly, for she knew instinctively what it would say. She glanced eastward again. The dot had disappeared. Matt Skinner was in her thoughts entirely too much these days. She would banish him, beginning now. She would not think about him any more. Why was a man like him punching cows for wages? Who was he? Where had he come from? One never could tell what he was going to say next. Third letter of the word he was thinking, indeed! She hoped she hadn't flushed, but she knew she had. What was he going to do now? She stamped her foot and strode to the ranchhouse, kicking pebbles from the path.

CHAPTER XIV

CONFIDENCES

WHEN Matt returned to the line house the sun was shining and the sandy soil already was dry, except where depressions held more than their share of water. Reb and Slim were not to be seen, but the tracks of their horses, sharp and fresh against the rain-packed sand, led to the north. Matt stripped Pete, turned him loose, and picked up the equipment. He felt tired all over and his eyes were heavy, for he had gone without sleep longer than he was accustomed to go, had ridden more than eighty miles, and used his faculties at the top of their power. No sooner had he settled into a bunk than he was asleep, and when he awakened he heard Reb and Slim returning. They entered the house and started to make a fire, keeping as quiet as possible, but when he turned over and looked at them they got busy in earnest.

"Wake you up?" asked Reb, slamming a stove lid into place.

"Ho-hum! Reckon not. *Gosh!* E-a-a-a-h! What time is it?"

"Time to eat," answered Slim. "Where's Baldy?"

Matt stretched and frowned at the door. "Cloudin' up ag'in?" he asked.

"Clear an' fine," grunted Reb. "I'll have supper in no time, Matt."

Matt stared at him. "Supper? Supper? Why supper?"

"'Cause it's time for it," answered Slim, peeling potatoes with a pocket knife and not worrying about the thickness of the peelings.

Matt rolled out and sat up, fishing for a boot. "Holy maverick! Supper time!"

"Where's Baldy?" persisted Slim, grabbing at a rolling potato.

"Chet's keepin' him close to th' ranchhouse," answered Matt, watching closely.

"Been some trouble?"

Matt considered a moment and nodded. "Quite some, first an' last. There was Milt bein' hung, that letter that Cal Howard wrote, th' hangman's noose, th' power of th' human eye, an' them three bums that chased Miss Agnes. Ho-hum! Gosh, I'm sleepy. Baldy didn't like it, havin' to hang around th' houses. Is that a reg'lar thing?"

The potatoes were not being peeled, the knife hung motionless over a fat strip of bacon, and the two punchers vied with each other in high speed but bewildered assimilation of the words of the new line rider. Potato knife and bacon fell at the same moment, Slim mechanically fishing his knife out of the water, vaguely conscious that it would make rust where it would be hard to get at.

"Huh?" said Reb.

"What?" said Slim.

"Fact," grunted Matt, fishing for the other boot, his big toe wriggling through the hole in the sock and experimenting in the prehensile art. "Wonder why Chet's keepin' him there, with all this rustlin' goin' on?"

"There ain't none goin' on," said Reb. "Ain't been none since Chet chased Bud outa here. What was th' trouble? Who chased Miss Agnes?"

"Yeah; an' what about some letter, an' th' hangman's noose, an' somebody's eye?" asked Slim. He kicked shut the draft door of the stove and growled something about burning up all the wood on the ranch. Saving firewood was his hobby. It was suspected that in some remote time he had been a trail herd cook.

"Baldy an' me caught three bums chasin' Miss Agnes," said Matt, slinging his belt around him. "We beat 'em up an' made 'em hoof it." He gave them an account of the episode, and their comments were heartfelt and frank.

When Reb's vocabulary had settled down to terms used to express definite objective entities, he nodded in sudden understanding. "That's why Baldy's picketed on th' home pasture," he declared. "Nobody is takin' chances where Miss Agnes is concerned; an' with Baldy loafin' near, there won't be no chances took. A Los Altos bum only has to *see* Baldy to get a change of heart an' a yearnin' for home."

The vision of the saloon flashed across Matt's mind and he grinned. The power of the human eye was a wonderful and beautiful thing.

"What about somebody's eye?" asked Slim.

Matt told them and Reb grinned.

"Yeah; th' son-of-a-gun won five dollars from me last summer doin' that," he said. "There was six of 'em in there, an' he bet me a dollar on each of 'em that they would get up an' sneak outa th' back door. Five did, but Baldy's eye musta been gettin' stronger an' stronger, for th' sixth went out through th' window. We called that bet off." He shook his head. "I'm allus perticular about th' terms of a bet," he declared, righteously.

"I'm admittin'—you—are!" said Matt. "Holy maverick! Particular ain't th' name for it!"

"What about th' letter?" demanded Slim, determined that nothing should be overlooked. He had heard the manifest and was set on checking it up to the last item. "*Hey!* Reb! Don't put on no more wood till we get ready to use it!"

Matt explained about the letter in a vague, unsatisfactory way, but Slim was as particular about details as his friend was about the terms of a wager; and Matt, having Baldy's words for the loyalty of these two men, and wishing to prepare them against contingencies, took them into his confidence.

"Baldy reckons he's wanted by th' sheriff of Grant County," he explained. "That was who it was sent to. He figgers mebby somebody'll be comin' up here after him." He yawned. "He's wanted for bank robbery, an' can't go back to stand trial while Grant County politics is like what they are now. He's goin' to need his friends, if I figger right; an' there he is, hangin' 'round where they can find him easy. It don't look right."

"'Tain't right," said Slim. "Soon's he tells Chet about it somebody will take his place."

"Baldy's got a scheme of his own," replied Matt. "Told me not to let Chet, or nobody but you two, know anythin' about it. You fellers ain't to say anythin' about him an' that letter. He said Glenn could depend on you two, come hell or high water; an' keepin' quiet about *this* shore will be a test of *that*."

"You bein' th' third man Glenn can depend on?" asked Slim, very softly.

"Baldy seems to think so; an' me an' him has been doin' things, an' a lot of thinkin'. There's funny things happenin' 'round here, an' more are goin' to happen. It's for us to keep our mouths shut, our ears an' eyes open, an' our guns oiled." He put on his sombrero and scowled. "There's somethin' else I got to tell you so you'll get th' hang of things."

"Th' hangman's noose?" queried Slim, folding down his little finger as the item was checked.

"No; somethin' else first," said Matt, whereupon Slim straightened the little finger and tried to keep the one next to it from giving it more than moral support.

"It happened th' first day I come here," explained Matt, and told them of his session with Cal Howard at the ranchhouse. "He would 'a' been mad enough from bein' throwed down like he was, but when an idjut like me cut in an' made a monkey of him it would make him madder. I didn't even have th' sense to take him serious in th' fightin', but handled him like he was a schoolboy. Some men can forgive a lickin', but not many can overlook bein' made ridiculous. We got to keep our eyes peeled for Cal; he's fair sizzlin' to get square."

This called for discussion, but Slim's third finger was aching from its restrained efforts to join the little one, and he cut the talk short and demanded to be told about the hangman.

Matt began with the peculiar knot in the rope he had cut from Milt's neck, telling his observations and deductions in their proper order, and how he and Baldy had raced the storm water through Striped Canyon, placed the noose, and then disappeared in the storm, riding over the hard rock of a trail south of the line house. His companions forgot the supper and the ravenous fire, and hitched closer and closer, their expressions ringing the changes from profound appreciation of his mental processes to hilarious laughter. At the conclusion they were slapping each other and him, and nearly weeping from mirth.

"You don't know of any sailor livin' hereabouts, do you?" he asked them during a lull for the recovery of breath.

They did not. They said so with a regret which palpitated, and would have led a fourth party, had one been there, to the flat and positive conviction that to be a sailor on that range, and discovered, was to endure much unpleasantness.

"I was lookin' for a man who had been a sailor; but where I looked for one I shore found two," and he told them of the suspicious markings on the partly covered wrist of the greaser bartender in Los Altos. "Know anythin' about him?"

"That ain't no tattooin'; it's powder marks," said Slim. "Know that for a fact. That was a funny joke

on th' Peabodys, but yo're wrong there. They didn't try to hang Milt. It was them bums, or Bud Skinner."

"I'm sayin' bums," said Reb. "Them, or th' Peabodys."

"I'm reckonin' on Bud, first; bums, second," declared Slim.

"Mebby," grunted Matt. "Wonder how Chet figgers it? I ain't heard him say."

"He'd say Bud," answered Slim.

Reb nodded. "Shore. He blames Bud for everythin'."

"So I've heard," muttered Matt.

"He says we got them Los Altos scourin's on th' brain," snorted Slim. "Just laughs at us when we blame them for anythin', an' says it was Bud. He says them bums ain't got th' nerve to steal cattle from no ranch like ourn."

"Shouldn't wonder if he was right," said Matt, thoughtfully. "But there's a question I could ask him if I wanted to."

"Three of 'em had nerve enough to chase Miss Agnes!" exclaimed Reb.

"Ex-actly," muttered Matt, hiding his smile.

"Th' fire's gone out," said Slim, reproachfully.

"Got to take some chances when yo're savin' firewood!" retorted Reb. "Why didn't you watch it? You was bossin' th' stove."

The fire rebuilt and the supper cooked and eaten, Matt carried his riding gear outside.

"Where you goin?" asked Reb, loafing to the door.

"To get Pete an' go ridin'," answered Matt.

"So I figgered," said Reb, sarcastically. "Goin' in to see Baldy?"

"No. What's th' use of watchin' Glenn's Canyon durin' th' day an' lettin' it slide at night? I'm goin' down there."

"Ain't no use watchin' it day *or* night," called Slim. "Th' rustlin' stopped long ago."

"Chet didn't act like he thought that when he hired me," objected Matt. "Said Long Jack had been scared away, an' wanted to know if I was gun shy."

"That was his way of findin' out, I reckon," commented Reb. "Long Jack was scared off more'n a month ago. Chet figgers he got to bullyin' greasers an' they laid for him."

"Then he didn't blame Bud *this* time," said Matt. "How would rustlers drive cattle off this range? Through Glenn's, or over west?"

"Too many folks over west," answered Reb. "Most our cows favour this side of th' ranch because of th' water. They'd have to drive 'em across th' ranch if they took 'em west."

"Would they drive through Striped Canyon?" asked Matt.

"They'd go through Glenn's, past th' other," said Slim. "Th' only way they'd go through Striped would be if they rustled a bunch over th' divide south of here an' drove 'em down th' other side."

"Then th' Peabodys would know it," mused Matt. "Ever ketch any of that fambly foolin' around?"

"No; we suspected 'em at first, but they never bothered us."

"I've slept so much that I'm outa step now," said Matt, going for his horse. "I'll ride around till I get sleepy. Don't say nothin' about me roamin' nights; not for awhile, anyhow."

They watched him get Pete, saddle up, and ride away. Reb grinned suddenly and called after him:

"Don't get nervous an' shoot no Long T cows, Matt. They're choice animals we bought for breedin' purposes. Ol' Man says we got to improve our animals if we aim to get top prices. Cost us near seven thousan' dollars for less than two hundred fifty head."

Matt waved and went on again, keeping off the line trail. At the mouth of Glenn's Canyon he picketed Pete, took his rifle, and slipped into the gorge, feeling his way in the dark. He had not been there an hour before he heard a horse coming slowly from the other end, and he squirmed around until he was looking at the lightest patch of sky against the canyon entrance. The rider passed within a dozen feet of him, swearing as the horse stumbled, and while Matt could not make out more than a vague blot in the darkness, he thought he knew the voice. Letting a few minutes pass he slipped out of the gorge after the rider, but the latter soon drew away.

"All right," muttered Matt, turning back to the canyon. "I'll wait for him to come back. He's Obadiah, an' I don't like him a-tall."

An hour before dawn the rider returned, softly whistling a short air over and over again, with a chorus in between. The air was in strict tempo, heavily accented, and Matt found himself keeping time to it. He never

had heard a chanty, and did not know what one was; but this air was to run for days through his mind and become a nuisance.

Dawn found him in the saddle, and two hours later he abandoned the tracks leading toward Los Altos and turned to go to the line house.

CHAPTER XV

A FRUITFUL WATCH

MATT was getting ready to cook supper the following evening when his two friends rode in and, seeing the culinary preparations going on, gave him enthusiastic greeting. There was little more said until the dishes had been cleared away and pipe and cigarettes lighted.

Reb leaned against the wall and chuckled.

"If you trail everybody goin' to Los Altos from th' canyon you'll be busy, Matt."

"Reckon so," grunted Matt; "but I ain't th' only busy hombre in this part of th' country. Mebby somebody in th' Peabody fambly was sick, like you said; or mebby they was out of likker, like Slim figgered. I don't like none of 'em. What do they do for a livin'?"

"Farm a little an' raise a few head," answered Slim.

Reb snorted. "They don't farm enough to keep one man alive, an' th' cattle they raise won't keep 'em in tobacco."

Matt appeared not to be listening to them, and abruptly asked another question: "When did we get them Long T cows?"

"Couple months ago," answered Slim. "They was delivered to us. Nobody even bothered to vent brand 'em."

"Wasn't as long as that," said Reb, thoughtfully. "Nearer six weeks, I reckon. We ain't put our own mark on 'em yet."

"How's that?" asked Matt.

"Glenn says th' bill of sale is enough, seein' we don't aim to sell 'em," answered Slim. "We no sooner got through countin' em than th' whole bunch stampeded into th' brush, an' Chet said if we made up our minds to brand 'em we could do it at th' fall round-up."

"Long Jack's been gone a couple of months, ain't he?" asked Matt.

"No," answered Reb. "He left about a week after th' Long T's came."

"I suppose they're scattered all over th' ranch," suggested Matt.

"Most of 'em are in th' brakes an' rough country south of here, along th' crick," said Slim. "They're wilder than most of our cattle, too."

Matt arose, stretched, and knocked out his pipe. "Well, time for me to be movin'."

In a few minutes he rode away, his line mates grinning after him and then going into the house to play cards until bedtime.

Reb blew out the light and felt for the bunk. "Skinner can shore ask more questions than any man I ever knowed," he observed.

"Rambles from one thing to another like a loco cow," replied Slim, turning over with a sigh of relief. "Miss Agnes shore has put her brand on him," he chuckled. "Notice how quiet an' sorta far away he gets at times?"

"That ain't nothin' strange," growled Reb. "She ain't missed nobody yet. Shut up, an' go to sleep."

Matt had been waiting a long time, but about midnight he heard the clatter of hoofs and guessed the number of horses at five or six. Nearer and nearer came the riders, and soon he caught snatches of conversation in Spanish. Three men bulked against the western sky outlining the canyon entrance and the silhouettes of their high-crowned sombreros endorsed the tongue they used. The echoes in the canyon had fooled him about the number of horses. He followed swiftly, to make certain that it was Los Altos they were heading for, and because of snatches of higher pitched conversation and an occasional burst of laughter he was able to trail them until certain they were going to town, notwithstanding the time he had lost in getting his horse.

He was turning to go back when new sounds made him push into a thicket. Why was it no one made use of the canyon in daylight?

The voices of the three Mexicans were swelled by two men speaking poor Spanish, and a round of low laughter was followed by expressions of farewell. Three horses cantered on toward town, two others came toward him. The riders passed close to him, talking in low voices, and there came to his ears a curious sound: something was striking against something else at regular intervals, keeping time to the movements of the horses. It was a flat sound with a hollow note in it. He racked his memory, but desisted quickly as words became intelligible.

"Mebby; but I'm goin' to be shore," growled a heavy,

coarse voice, which Matt recognized as belonging to Obadiah Peabody. "When I am shore I aim ter slit a throat damn quick."

"Mebby it was that new puncher," said the other rider, and Matt's jaw set hard at the sound of that voice and the timbre of it. It vibrated with hatred.

"Be that as it may, we ain't pullin' no chestnuts," retorted Obadiah, sensing the other's urging for vengeance. "We're doin' yore watchin' fer ye now. Be satisfied."

"Think he's a ranger, do you?"

"Shore do."

"What's he doin' out of Texas, then?"

"How do I know!" snapped Obadiah. "If you knowed them rangers like we do, you wouldn't be askin' fool questions. Ever try to shake one off yore trail? Huh: I reckon you ain't. Well, there's time enough till he tries to wipe off my chin. I'll show him somethin' in th' way of fightin' he——" The voice grew indistinct with the increasing distance, but a hearty curse came back a moment later.

"Cal Howard an' Obadiah Peabody," muttered Matt, rigid in the saddle. "Thick as thieves, too. Them three greasers knowed 'em both an' was so polite it fair smells of somethin'. Cal an' Obadiah! An' Cal blamin' me for hangin' up that noose, I reckon, so somebody'll do his killin' for him! Now if th' Peabodys come smellin' around for information about that hangman's knot I won't be able to figger it. Pete, that's a low-down trick; after me plannin' it so careful to find out who strung up Milt!"

He went back to the canyon on a roundabout course; but his vigil during the remainder of the night was fruitless and before dawn came he left to ride back to the line house, angry and puzzled, and very suspicious.

As he came to the lush grass the sounds of the squashing of Pete's hoofs brought back a former scene and he checked the animal and scanned the side of the ridge for the bench where Mrs. Peabody had scored a bull's-eye. He recalled one expression of her face, one swift glance of her eyes. Turning Pete he rode back toward the canyon at a walk, studying every yard of the steep ridge, impatient for the light of day to show him what he sought. At last, snugly hidden in the near angle of the jutting promontory, he came upon an opening between the bowlders, like numerous other openings, except that pebbles and small rocks had been dislodged from their clay beds, and ground out of place, scoring the hard earth in their dislodgment. Brush masked the sides of the path until it entered a steeply pitched ravine which scored into the side of the ridge and ran up at an angle, the outer rim blending so perfectly with the other side as to render it invisible from the plain below.

He forced Pete along the narrow path, determined to see where it ran, and it was all the willing horse could do to gain the top. However this path might serve a horseman in furtive flight from the range and let him cross the ridge without having to use the canyon, it did not serve for the driving of stolen cattle. He came to a little opening which was not sheltered from the view

of any one on the bench below. From it he looked down to where Mrs. Peabody had entertained Milt and him until her men-folks had gained this opening and were waiting to cross it.

"She tricked us, Pete," he said. "Soon as we had crawled below th' rim she signalled an' th' men crossed this place, went around them hummocks, and were out of sight again. We'll see where they went."

The path crossed the top of the ridge and went down the other side half a dozen paces, where it divided. One branch led to the left, pitching down until lost in the brush and bowlders; the other, roughly following the top of the ridge, but keeping below it, turned and dipped, flanking masses of bowlders, cutting through scattered timber and patches of brush, and wound away southward. At intervals he dismounted and climbed to the top of the divide, and each time the sweep of his vision was limited only by the morning mists which arose in billows far below him, like thin smoke rolling before the wind. Later in the day every movement for miles would lay exposed to any watcher on these heights.

He came to a rise in the ridge, which from the plain below resembled the hump of a camel. It lay to the south of the line house, and south of the hump the divide, dwindling, raised no part as high as this. From the three sides of this little peak the surrounding country lay in view.

Dismounting, he followed a footpath leading upward over rock. Its definition was not to be found under foot so much as along the sides, where scrawny brush

had been forced apart to leave a narrow lane. Its marking suggested constant use, and he went up as silently as possible, but he found no one on the up-ended box in the little clearing on the top. Hard clay filled the hollows of the rock here, and deeply scored in it were three small holes, a foot and a half apart, forming a triangle. They were on the side of the box facing the ranch, and for a short radius the grass was worn off and the clay held numerous partial heel-prints. These were small, and in each instance the mark of the inner side of the heel was the one remaining in evidence. His own heel-marks would show the outer edge; Baldy's would show the outer edge very plainly. Obadiah had mentioned watching for Cal Howard: why was there need for a watch to be kept, and why should it be kept over the range of the Hundred Eleven? And who on the range was knock-kneed?

Going down the path he watched both sides of it, and stopped in front of a wall of brush that showed signs of often having been disturbed. Parting this, he saw a home-made tripod lying on its side. It had a top piece made of a block of wood, and following the grain was a rough groove over an inch across. On each side of the groove was a hole through the block, and through these were short pieces of small rope, both ends knotted. He closed the bushes and went on, mounted Pete, and rode across the ridge under the southern and precipitous face of the hump. By careful picking and choosing he made his way under the west face and down to the bottom of the ridge, hidden by a shoulder from the watch place above. It was thus possible

to approach the top of the hump from the range and remain unseen if the bottom of the ridge were closely followed.

"Good thing to remember," he muttered. "If Baldy has to cut an' run—*Gosh!* I'm glad we didn't stop that letter! Cal has busted one of my plays, but he's given me an excuse for another. If Baldy has to cut an' run; shore! With him loose—holy mavericks! Things will mebby happen fast around here! I'm honin' for a visit from th' sheriff of Grant County."

He approached the line house from the east, in case the watcher on the hump by this time had taken up her duties, and he saw Reb and Slim swinging into their saddles. They stopped at his hail and waited.

"Any of you fellers ever explored th' ridge?" he asked.

"No; what for?" asked Slim.

"Curiosity, mebby; huntin' strays, mebby; trimmin' th' fringes at round-up; how do I know what for?" asked Matt. "I've done a lot of fool ridin' in my time that I didn't have no reason for."

"Ever been close enough to it for a good look?" demanded Slim, getting ready to argue.

"Yes," answered Matt. "Just come from it. Ain't you never felt like climbin' it?"

"Listen here," said Slim. "I ain't climbin' nothin' that I can't climb settin' in a saddle. There's a way through it at th' canyon; there's half a dozen ways across it south of th' hump. I ain't got no interest for nothin' in between."

"Then if I asked you if there was a way to ride over

it, between Glenn's Canyon an' th' hump, you'd reckon there wasn't?"

"That's what I'd reckon. You hit it first try," answered Slim.

"What you worryin' about, Matt?" asked Reb. "Aimin' to go explorin'?"

"I've been explorin'," answered Matt, dismounting. "I found a trail goin' *over* th' ridge, just this side of th' canyon. An' you can climb it settin' a saddle, Slim. After it gets over, it branches two ways. One leads down toward th' Peabody house; th' other goes along th' far side of th' ridge, just under its top. I'm tellin' you because I want you to locate it, but not to go up it; an' don't let nobody see yo're tryin' to locate it. Just pick it out as you ride past some day. Here: this is what it looks like," and he described it for them.

"I know just about where it is," said Reb, thinking hard.

"Me, too," said Slim.

"Then get away from here with yore fool noise so I can get somethin' to eat an' go to sleep," said Matt, waving them off.

CHAPTER XVI

DISCOVERIES

THE next few nights added nothing to Matt's knowledge, except to strengthen his belief that after dark the canyon was regularly used by several riders to and from Los Altos. The growing moon made it more and more hazardous to follow any one across the open, and he was scowling at it when the thought came that he could make good use of its light. Every man on the ranch with the exception of himself believed the rustling had ceased. His questions about the canyons across the ridge received answers so vague that he learned nothing about them that he did not know.

Then came the night when he rode straight for the base of the ridge and followed it closely. After he passed the swampy area he dismounted, picketed Pete in a brush-hidden hollow, and went forward on foot. Instead of going to the canyon he turned aside and went up the little path he had discovered and followed a week before.

Waiting at the top until his breathing became normal again, he went down the other side, and at the place where the path divided he chose the northern branch. Occasionally, as it led out along the face of the ridge, he could see the lights of the Peabody house

ahead and below. Once he thought he caught the glimmer of a light far off in the east, but it disappeared so suddenly and had been so faint that he was not sure. The path went up and down, each downward dip the longer, and finally he stopped behind and above the house at the end of Striped Canyon. He heard a woman singing in the kitchen, but the words could not be made out. Seating himself on a ledge back from the path, where he might be overlooked by any one going along it, he settled down to wait, sorry that the valley immediately below lay under the shadow of the ridge.

A light gleamed at the first bend of Striped Canyon and another flashed in front of the house. He leaned forward eagerly, but nothing further happened. Gradually he began to recall the picture of the house as his memory retained it. It stood vividly before his mind's eye, replete with details to which he had given no conscious attention. The haystack he might be expected to remember, but not with the photographic exactness with which it came to him. The corral wall was not vague, but each bowlder was definitely outlined. Never had he given any thought to this faculty of his because he did not know it was anything unusual; he accepted it as a matter of course and as being possessed by all men. The horses he had seen in the corral moved for him as they had before. They were five in number, and two bore the marks of saw-buck packsaddles. His memory crowded a mass of small details before him, details seemingly disconnected and irrelevant, but now they integrated into a concrete, explanatory whole.

He chuckled even while he scored himself for having been stupid, and he visualized the kind of load those saw-buck saddles carried. The actions of the Peabodys were no longer a mystery, and the momentum of his discovery, satisfying as it did his conjectures about them, nearly carried him too far. Throughout the ages one steady curse to the growth of knowledge has been explanations which seemingly explained. There is a void in thought which needs filling, and it has been the habit of the vast majority of the human race to accept any filler which seemed to fit. The genesis of superstition has had no greater aid than this makeshift, verbally intelligible sop. Earlier generations explained the lightning as the flaming sword of the gods, the thunder as their roaring anger; the question was answered, the mystery explained, and no one seemed to need an explanation of the second mystery, perhaps greater than the first.

Matt was nearly satisfied, but there came to him the thought that a man like Cal Howard was not likely to play a dangerous game for petty profits, and he seemed to be linked to this shiftless family in some undertaking. Now he understood how this family made a living, this family that did not raise enough farm products or sell enough cattle to sustain it; he understood the watch place and the tripod, with the whole of the Los Altos-Valverde trail and the entire range under the watcher's gaze; the peculiar sound he had heard when Cal Howard and Obadiah Peabody had passed him on the plain that night; the grandfather's suspicious look and the word "Ranger" which had burst from him;

their heretofore unaccountable hostility; this hidden path along the divide and along its crest.

"Cal must be in with 'em," he muttered, "for Obadiah said they was watchin' as much for him as for themselves. Still, it might mean they was doin' his watchin' for him, an' he might be mixed up in somethin' entirely different. It's a mean puzzle! If that Grant County sheriff only will come after Baldy! If he does it'll mebby be th' biggest mistake Cal ever made. It's th' only way we can go ahead without makin' 'em suspicious."

Lights flashed up in the canyon and before the house. To his right, far down the creek bed, he caught an answering flash. The kitchen light went out, and in a little while he heard horses and a faint, rhythmical creaking, as of straining wood and leather. Not far from the house lay a pool of water in the creek bed, silvered by the light of the crescent moon. Pushing out before this came a horse and rider followed by a second. They stood out like jet cameos against the luminous background, animated silhouettes. Another horse appeared, sagging under a bulky and heavy load, sharply outlined against the pool. Behind it came another, its burden identical. A third horseman became a silhouette and followed the little *atejo* into the baffling darkness beyond.

Matt went farther down the path and stopped when the pack-train halted behind the house. He heard mixed and jumbled sounds; bumping and grating noises and muffled voices. A metallic squeak was followed by a dull bumping, repeated six times, each series ending in

a low rumble. The sounds of feet shuffling on stone were followed by another squeak of iron, and then the horses were led to the corral. In front of the house a light showed and was answered from the canyon. The kitchen lamp shone again and the rattle of dishes and the odour of cooking reached the watcher above. Matt laughed; he now knew where the wheat whiskey came from.

Matt waited until the men sat down to supper and then crept up the path. Although half of the night remained, he rode back to the line house and turned in, but his thoughts defied sleep. He was so wrapped up in his conjectures that he had no idea of how long he had been in the house when his ear caught a sound outside. He slipped the Colt from the holster hanging near his head and faced the room.

Slowly the door opened to a crack and remained there for two or three minutes. He became aware of the heavy breathing of his companions, and he accounted for his own presence by gently snoring. A pleasurable thrill ran through him while he watched the glow of moonlight coming through the crack, sorry the door opened the other way and did not give him a look at the head pressed close to it. If this were another hanging party there would be graves to dig in the morning. He held back the trigger of the Colt, cocked the hammer, and let the trigger go back again, doing away with warning clicks. Then he heard the slow footfalls of a horse. They sounded as if the animal was approaching cautiously, a few steps at a time, and there came a sudden curious, fearful snort. He guessed it was

Pete, curious to see what was going on. At the sound the door closed and a soft whisking noise endured for a few moments. The horse moved on again, and the sudden clatter of hoofs spoke of fright.

Matt swiftly crossed the room and, placing his hand over Reb's mouth, awakened the puncher by a shake and a warning word. Slim came next and mumbled a question against the palm of Matt's hand. He explained in a whisper, swore softly as Slim carelessly cocked his six-gun, and crept to the door, his companions after him. They waited a few minutes and then opened the door. Matt, on hands and knees, thrust his head into the opening and glanced about. Pete was standing on a hillock, his ears raised and his head turned to the southwest. Dressed in their worn and soiled underwear, girdled by heavy belts, the three slipped along the front wall, two going one way while the third went the other, and stopped at the corners. Matt, leaping from the wall so as to turn the corner a few feet from it, glanced along the end of the house and then crept toward the rear, his companions doing the same. In another moment the three were gazing at each other, grins taking the place of tense expressions.

"Dreamin'!" grunted Reb, disgustedly.

"Shore," said Slim.

"A man don't dream when he's awake," retorted Matt, looking in the direction his rigid horse pointed out. He moved from the house and bent over. "Huh!" he grunted. "Mebby these are dreams! You fellers make these tracks?"

They joined him, shaking their heads, and staring at the evidence.

"Listen!" said Reb, freezing.

"Can't hear nothin'," grunted Slim after a moment. "What you reckon you heard?"

"Cayuse. You hear it, Matt?"

"No." He swore and looked at them, shivering a little in the keen night air. "An' everybody sayin' th' rustlin' had stopped!"

Slim was briskly rubbing gooseflesh and turned to go back into the house.

"Come on," he said. "We can talk indoors as good as we can out here; an' in th' mornin' we'll see where these lead to. Cripes, but it's chilly!"

They were closing the door when they stopped at the sound of racing hoofs rapidly coming nearer.

"Pacer!" grunted Matt. The hoofs thundered nearer. "Comin' like blazes, too. It's Baldy, headin' for th' hills!"

CHAPTER XVII

"ACTING NATURAL"

AT THE ranchhouse Baldy had an easy time of it, and was envied by his mates, who daily rode off and left him loafing around the houses, riding with Miss Agnes, shooting craps with her brother, or trailing Randall Glenn when the latter rode abroad. At other times he hung around the kitchen and quarrelled with the cook, or singled out an unbroken horse and filled the breaking corral with dust, profanity, and general turmoil. His peculiar construction, running as it did to bowed long legs and short torso, fitted him admirably for breaking horses. All animals looked alike to him, and when he finished with them they acted as nearly alike as possible. After each session in the corral the hopeful and pop-eyed cook shuffled despondently back to his stove, sighed at a pleasure deferred, and got ready to defend his biscuits.

Baldy heaved his saddle out of the corral, climbed the bars, and wiped perspiration from his face as he grinned insolently at the back of the departing and disappointed cook. He looked into the corral and let the grin go as it lay for the red-eyed, side-heaving sorrel which still bucked instinctively, its scattered senses not yet capable of telling it that the fight was

over. Sweat dripped from the foam-covered coat, and the conquered animal scarcely could stand on its sprawled legs. By the same hour on the following day doubts would return in the pony's mind as to who was master in the whirlwind show in the corral, but a second or third lesson would clear the matter and put the sorrel in the ridable class.

Baldy bit into a generous plug after wiping dust, sand, and lint from its sticky, worried end, and looked toward the ranchhouse where Milt, walking with awkward, tied-in, and heel-tilted stride, made his way toward the corral, and as he drew near his grin widened, which concentrated the freckles until they resembled a thin smear of orange peel.

"I was *savin'* him for myself," said Milt, glancing again at the still weaving sorrel.

Baldy laughed. "Then I saved yore life." He looked around and lowered his voice. "Wonder when they're comin' after me, Milt? Waitin' is hard on my nerves, an' I'm tired of cat-nappin' durin' th' day an' tryin' to stay awake nights."

"Still want me to keep th' pinto saddled out yonder all night?"

"Shore!" answered Baldy. "You know what Matt said. Tell Miss Agnes I'm thankin' her for holdin' th' pacer ready for me. There ain't nothin' can catch me, once I get on Dawn."

"Bad cayuse to ride, though," said Milt, thoughtfully. "They can track it easy. You got to change at th' line house. Push Dawn at top speed all th' way to gain time an' tire out their animals. Swap cayuses

there an' pick a cow-pony. In th' hills you want a goat, anyhow: Dawn ain't used to that kind of goin'." He scratched his head and beamed. "Reb's got th' cayuse for th' hills; that black can climb anythin'." He rubbed his back against the corral and spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "Here comes Chet!" In a louder voice he said: "You'll shorten yore days, bustin' so many animals, Baldy. That pitchin' fool in there allus has been figgered an outlaw. He's a man-killer."

"He did his damndest just now, but he didn't kill nobody," said the two-gun man, grinning.

"Just th' same, you know how long a reg'lar buster lives," persisted Milt, doggedly.

"They ain't got rubber insides, like me," chuckled Baldy, picking up the saddle. He hoisted it onto his shoulder, his face changing to a bitter frown. "When th' Lord made me His hand slipped; but he made some mistakes in my favour. He gave me a body that can't fall off a cayuse, arms an' hands like steel, an' a gun speed I ain't never seen equalled. Hello, Chet. Milt reckons I ain't goin' to live long, bustin' so many cayuses. I just put th' fear in that wall-eyed sorrel. Couple more sessions an' he'll near be fit for Miss Agnes."

The foreman glanced through the palisades. The sorrel, its ears flattened and its red eyes wicked with murder, was weaving toward a corner. Its flanks still heaved, the sweat still dripped from its belly, and its legs were uncertain.

The foreman looked at Baldy with sincere admiration. The horse had been ridden to exhaustion. Three

good men had tried to break the sorrel, and the animal had broken them and earned the name of outlaw. Then it had wandered onto the Hundred Eleven range, been caught with a bunch of other horses, and held in the corral until word had been sent to Billings, its owner, to come and get it. His answer had been to shoot it. Chet hated to do this and was marking time. Now Baldy had ridden it to a ragged frazzle.

"He's *yourn,*" said the foreman. "If you don't bust his spirit till he's worthless he'll be whalebone and chain lightnin'; but if you don't bust it till he's plumb worthless he'll kill you, first chance he gets. He's *yourn!*"

"All right; I'll ride him ag'in to-morrow," replied Baldy, his eyes glinting. "After that he'll be my saddle horse." He smiled inwardly and made a mental reservation. The sorrel would not become his saddle horse until there was no danger of any visitors from Grant County. Such a horse would waste its energies in a long pursuit, sun-fish, pitch and balk, and be easily overtaken. Not having learned the lesson of the rope it would fight its picket line, doing itself injury, wasting its strength and its grazing time; and if it were not staked out it would run away. "I'll throw an old saddle on him," said Baldy, thinking aloud. "Keep it on him day an' night after th' next session, as long as it'll last. There ain't goin' to be no doubt in *his* mind who's boss."

"Do what you want," said the foreman. "He's yourn, but he'll kill you some day." He grinned. "When you get him tame enough, ride him over to

Billings. He'll near drop dead." He wheeled his horse. "I'm goin' to Los Altos for th' mail."

"Wish Matt was here," growled Baldy, watching Taggart ride away. He shook his thighs, the six-guns jogging in the open holsters. "Tell you one thing, Milt: I ain't goin' back to Grant County till I get word from th' right man. If I can get away, all right; if I can't, I'll take a few to hell with me. Come on: let's go ride th' cook."

Milt swung along at his friend's side, worried, thoughtful.

"They oughta come soon if they're comin' a-tall," he said.

Baldy looked at the fingers of his left hand, mentally tallying on them. "Yes," he answered. "To-day or to-morrow. Time's short. You watch me throw down on any strangers a-visitin' us; but they'll send somebody that knows me by sight. If they *do* know me, they'll reckon it's safer to come at night, when I'm asleep. Damn buzzards!"

When the foreman returned he seemed a little anxious and nervous. His eyes kept turning to Baldy and he carried on a jerky and difficult conversation with the two-gun man. At supper he forced the talking and then suddenly lapsed into taciturnity, as if he feared he was not acting naturally. Milt, who ate in either house as the mood suited, shovelled food into his mouth and stepped on Baldy's foot in warning. After the meal was over the foreman wandered out and went poking about the corrals. It was dark when he returned to loaf against the bunkhouse, smoking immoder-

ately and keeping Baldy under his eyes. He missed Milt, but thought nothing of it. Milt was a privileged character and spent part of his time at the ranchhouse, where his uncle had good liquor and cigars. While thinking about the nephew he saw the ranchhouse door open, and Milt shot into silhouette, whirled to throw something at the Chinese cook, and then raced toward the bunkhouse.

The men on the bench outside the bunkhouse made room for him and he flopped down among them, panting and laughing.

"Phew!" he exclaimed. "I wrapped th' dish rag plumb around his head just before he threw th' soap. Oh, hey, Baldy! Uncle Rand wants to see you. He's got you down on th' book for nine shirts since last payday. He keeps books like a tin-horn gambler keeps th' Sabbath. Go up an' straighten him out."

Baldy swore as he heaved to his feet. "There ain't been that many shirts bought by th' hull outfit in a year! Cripes!"

As he waddled toward the ranchhouse he was given generous advice by his friends, who seemed to find mirth in the idea of Baldy buying nine shirts since payday; or nine shirts in nine years. It was the collective opinion, freely expressed, that he never bought a shirt, at least not while other people wore shirts and removed them at night. They admitted he never had been without a shirt, so far as they knew, even when someone else had to run around the bunkroom in vain search of his own. They saw him open the ranchhouse door, pass in and close it behind him, and Milt felt the fore-

man squirm uneasily and stare out over the range, lighted by the bright half moon.

A few moments later Milt arose, stretched, and yawned. The pacer was tied with a jerk knot to the hitch rail at the ranchhouse, and in the ranchhouse kitchen was a bulky roll ready to be strapped to the saddle. The kitchen stood between the horse and the bunkhouse. From the way the foreman was acting Milt was certain that this was the night chosen for Baldy's arrest. He pulled Black Dan's sombrero over its wearer's eyes and ears, shoved Gage off the bench, and ran for the ranchhouse, jeering them over his shoulder. The door slammed shut after him, but the front door opened and closed softly from a darkened room and he slipped along the front of the house. Baldy's voice sent him to all-fours, crawling toward the sound.

"Uncle Rand suspicious about you comin' up?" he asked, stopping at the side of the two-gun man.

"No; I asked him where you was, an' bein' so close to th' front door I went out that way. Milt, he looks worried; what's botherin' him?"

"Got a notice to pay a note for seven thousan' dollars on th' first of th' month. He can't raise th' money nowhere." He looked around. "Where's Agnes an' him now?"

"Takin' a walk som'ers out front. What you know?"

"This is th' night," growled Milt. "Chet knows what's comin', damn his soul! He acts like he had th' itch. Why are they aimin' to take you?"

"To get rid of a killer," grunted Baldy. "Wish

Matt was here." He toyed with his boot strap. "We're doin' this wrong, Milt. If I leave without bein' chased they'll reckon we know their game. It'll put 'em on their guard, an' make ambushes. Matt said I had to act nat'ral, an' I ain't doin' it. I'm goin' back to th' bunkhouse an' yo're goin' with me. Nothin'll start till I've had time to get to sleep. Nobody is anxious to start a ruckus with me when I'm awake. They don't put up th' curtains one night a week, an' when we go in we'll close th' door. Here, you listen to me," and he gave his companion detailed instructions.

Taggart was nervous because of Baldy's continued absence, but did not dare depart from the routine which had become habit. He was the last man to turn in and he lay awake with straining ears, sighing with relief when Baldy and Milt entered.

"Bunch of sleepy-heads," whispered Baldy, chuckling.

Milt closed the door and walked to the middle of the dark room.

"What a thirst!" he complained. "All I been doin' is drink water. Hope cook's barrel ain't empty," he muttered, going to the kitchen. There came a soft splash and the sound of the tin cup finding the nail again. Milt returned and began to undress. "Yo're slow, Baldy," he jeered.

"All tangled up," growled the two-gun man.

"Cuss it!" said Milt. "Bein' undressed I just remembered that Dawn is tied to th' hitch rack. Oh, well: let him stay there."

His bunk creaked and there came the soft rustling of

a straw tick. Across the room the sounds were repeated and silence descended. Half an hour passed and then Milt's bunk rustled again and a toe joint snapped as its owner went to the kitchen for a drink. There came a splash and then the tin cup went back on the nail.

Taggart squirmed, under his breath cursing Milt for closing the door. While he debated the question of getting up for a smoke, or finding some other excuse for lighting a match, he heard steps outside. Others came from the outside kitchen door, and he prepared to be awakened and greatly surprised. The bunkroom door opened quietly part way, two vague figures slipped into the room and closed it again as two more came in from the kitchen. Had the latter looked behind they would have seen the outer door move and a man slip from behind it, around it, and outside the house.

The invaders moved without hesitation to the bunk in the southeast corner of the room and hurled themselves into it. There came a grunt, a strangled curse, and the bunk fell apart and scattered itself about the room. Taggart, Black Dan, and Gage reached for their guns and yelled for information and a light.

"Don't mix in!" came a panted order. "We're arrestin' this feller. Strike a light, one of you damn fools! We're punchin' each other!"

Swearing angrily, Taggart complied, holding the match high. The busy air currents, set in motion by the fighting, blew it out as soon as it flared. Black Dan felt for the shelf, lit the lamp, and faced about, his Colt raised.

"Who th' hell are you?" he growled, glaring at the lamplight reflected from the nickel badges. Then he saw their prisoner. "Deppeties or no deppeties, you don't take Milt without a fight! Let loose of him!"

Taggart's face became pasty. "What you got ag'in Milt?" he demanded, amazement from one cause easily being understood as caused by another. "What's *he* done?"

The four men dropped Milt and themselves, writhing to fall with their faces toward the opposite bunk. It was empty! They sighed with relief and disappointment; relief that under the circumstances it was empty; disappointment because their perfect attack had captured the wrong man.

"Where's Baldy?" cried the leader, a stranger.

"Damn blunderin' fools!" snapped Milt, feeling his face. "Last I heard he was goin' for a drink. Mebby he went up to put up th' pacer."

"That's th' bunk!" roared the stranger. "Southeast corner! What you mean, Taggart?"

"Yo're ravin'!" snapped Taggart. "Any fool can see it is. How'd you know how to find it in th' dark?"

"Never mind that," retorted a Los Altos deputy. "Mebby you think none of us ain't never been in here before? But where's Baldy?"

"If you'd listen to me you'd mebby know," swore Milt. "He mebby went up to put th' pacer in th' corral. What you want him for?"

"Come on—an' *look out!*" cried the man from Grant County.

"You don't have to tell *us* to look out," retorted a Los

Altos man, leaping for the door. "He didn't know we was comin', so we'll try th' corral first. There's been a hell of a blunder som'ers!"

His three companions trailed after him, spreading out as they crept to the corral. Behind them they left a tempest, Milt cursing steadily; Gage trying not to look foolish and disappointed, and Black Dan honest in his wrath; the foreman, staring from Milt to the shattered bunk, tried to ask a question in a natural voice, but natural voices were not to be heard in all that noise.

"Hey, Taggart!" called a voice from the door. "Where's that pacer supposed to be tied?"

Taggart went to the door, pointed toward the ranchhouse, and then jerked his arm down and swore.

"I ain't helpin' nobody arrest a member of this outfit; find it yoreself!"

There came the whirr of hoofs racing toward the ranchhouse, and after a moment the sound of running horses died in the direction of the line house.

"Lucky you got in th' wrong bunk," said Taggart, trying to grin. "How'd you come to do it?"

"He was grumblin' about his bein' too narrer for him, so I swapped. But what's this all about, anyhow?"

"You know as much as I do," answered the foreman. "It was lucky he got away; wonder how he come to figger somethin' was up?"

"Huh!" snorted Milt. "Got thirsty, I reckon, me talkin' so much about it. Got up to get a drink, remembered what I said about th' pacer, an' reckoned he'd make me ashamed of myself by takin' care of it hisself. Reckon while he was doin' it he heard th'

ruckus an', havin' a guilty conscience, just lit out. Headin' for th' hills, I betcha."

Taggart turned back to the door, cursing silently but steadily. Baldy loose in the hills! Baldy loose in the hills! Damn Cal Howard and his fear of the two-gun man; damn him and his petty spite! Damn the swapping of berths; damn everybody, alive and dead! Baldy loose in the hills and forced to keep moving! Taggart was sick.

CHAPTER XVIII

LAYING A FALSE TRAIL

BALDY had to laugh when he saw the three punchers dressed in baggy coloured underwear and gun belts with scabbards. He checked the winded pacer and slid to the ground.

"Never knowed what ridin' was till just now," he said, stripping off the saddle. "Reb, I'm swappin' for yore black, an' I'm sorry I has to. You can have that Billings's sorrel in place of it. I rode it to a wreck today. Where is th' black?"

Reb had departed, and Baldy looked at the other two, his eyes narrowing. "Matt's right: Taggart knowed they was comin' for me. They went straight to my bunk in th' dark. Milt was usin' it. He'll tell you about it. Got anythin' to say, Matt?" he asked as Reb led up the black and helped to throw on the saddle and make the bulging roll fast to it.

Matt spoke rapidly, tersely, Slim and Reb showing surprise at some of his remarks. He slapped the two-gun man in the thigh and as Baldy started toward Glenn's Canyon Matt called after him, for emphasis.

"Up over th' ridge, like I said. Cover plenty of ground, an' if you see a wheat field, remember where it is. Don't get out of touch with us for very long!"

Baldy flung an arm in the air and streaked away.

"Oughta hide that pacer," said Slim. "They'll foller it here."

"Why hide it?" asked Matt. "Th' pacer's tracks stop here an' th' black's go on. They'll figger it in one look. Come an' turn in. I ain't thinkin' about them a-tall; but who was th' hombre that got us out of our bunks? Why did Chet horn in on Baldy's arrest? Tell you one thing: he's goin' to be sorry, th' way things has broke. He's near filled a four-card flush for me."

"What you mean?" asked Reb.

"Tell you later. Turn in; we look like th' devil to receive visitors." He grinned at the bow-legged grotesques in their patched and faded red flannels.

"You ain't no pitchure yoreself," chuckled Slim, wriggling his legs until the bags around his knees flopped. "It's gettin' cold out here. What we goin' to say when they come an' shake us outa a sound sleep?"

"You ain't goin' to say nothin'," replied Reb. "Matt an' me'll do th' talkin'. Won't we, Matt?"

Matt grunted affirmatively and went into the house, his companions following.

Slim chuckled as he crawled into his bunk. "Nice present Baldy gave you! Billings's sorrel! Cripes! Glad he didn't swap with me!" He snuggled down comfortably. "Busted up three good men, it did. 'Shoot it,' says Billings. Cripes!"

"Shut yore face!" growled Reb.

Minutes passed in silence, and then a muffled snort

came from Slim's bunk. "Billings's sorrel for th' black! Cripes!" The bunk creaked from restrained laughter.

"They're comin'," warned Matt, breathing regularly.

They were. The pounding of their horses bespoke no thought of a stealthy approach; but at a safe distance from the house the sounds ceased. The minutes dragged in heavy silence, and then a voice hailed stentoriously. It sagged with hope and authority.

"Hello th' house! Open th' door an' come out!"

"Somebody's outside," said Matt, loudly.

"Open th' door an' come out."

"He wants us to come out th' door. Reckon he wants you fellers," said Matt, lazily rolling over. "What you want?" he yelled in no amiable voice.

"You——*all* of you! Come out, one at a time."

"Stop that yellin' an' come in," called Matt. "Who you reckon you are, wakin' folks up an' gettin' 'em out of bed on a cold night like this?"

"Open that door an' come out, in th' name of th' law!"

"I'd rather go out in th' name of a blanket," growled Matt. He slid from the bunk, wrapped a blanket about him and opened the door, rubbing his eyes. "Ain't you got no sense?" he complained. "What you want?"

"Stand ag'in that wall! Come out, *all* of you!"

"Don't you do it!" shouted Matt. "Remember what happened to Milt!"

A man rose part way from behind a little ridge, his

gun slanting down on the blanket-wrapped figure against the wall.

"Shut yore damned face! I'm a deppity sheriff an' I want Baldy! Come out, *all* of you!"

"He's a deppity sheriff an' he wants Baldy," called Matt, earnestly.

"Tell him to go to hell," answered Reb.

"He says for you to go to hell," said Matt.

"I heard him!" snapped the deputy. "We got you surrounded; you ain't got a chance. Few minutes more an' I'll arrest th' whole bunch. Come out, an' stop this nonsense. Leave yore guns behind. Come out, Baldy first!"

"I'll go in an' tell 'em," offered Matt, moving toward the door.

"Stay where you are!" cried the deputy. "There's more guns than mine on you!"

"Yourn's enough if it ain't wobblin'," replied Matt. He turned his head. "*Hey*, fellers! Don't keep me here all night! Come out!"

Slim followed his frank and ungentlemanly language through the door and glared about him. "What these fools want?"

"They want Baldy," explained Matt.

"He owe *them* money, too?" Slim spat with energy. "What makes you reckon we got Baldy?" he called.

"Stand ag'in that wall, hands on yore head!" came the command from the ridge. "You in th' house; come out!"

"Hey, Reb, they mean you," said Slim.

"*Me?*" asked Reb.

"Yes, *you!*" shouted the deputy. "Come out!"

"Wait till I get my pants on—hey, Slim! You got my pants?"

Matt looked at Slim and grinned. "One thing I'll say about Reb: he's allus careful how he looks before company."

"Reg'lar dude," growled Slim. "Gimme a hunk of that blanket."

"Get yore own blanket," retorted Matt, jerking the desired article from his friend's closing grasp.

"Hey, deppity," called Slim. "I'm goin' in for my blanket; be right out."

The deputy's refusal contained more warmth than any blanket, and Slim writhed in his underclothes to create friction against his skin.

"Hurry up, Reb!" he growled. "I'm near froze!"

Reb, fully dressed and belted, stuck his hat out of the door and in a moment followed it with his head. Then he stepped out and looked around, his gaze settling on his two friends.

"You ain't got no manners a-tall," he rebuked them. "Here we are, bein' visited by some Los Altos drunks, an' you come out lookin' worse'n any of 'em. Oughta be ashamed!" He looked around in front of the house. "Well, we're here. What you bums want?"

"Come out, Baldy!" cried the man behind the ridge, his voice cracking with anger.

The three friends looked at each other.

"He reckons Baldy's in there," said Matt, surprised.

"If he is, an' comes out, he'll come a-shootin'," said Slim. "Mebby he snuk in when we was asleep."

He looked at the ridge. "You hoss thieves don't want nobody but Baldy, do you?"

"Come out, Baldy!" shouted the deputy. "You fools shut yore faces!" He swore at the silence. "Come out, or we'll pull you out!"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Reb. "Before you pull him out, lead us off som'ers! We ain't never done nothin' to you, an' this won't be no place for a human bein' when you go in to pull *him* out!"

"I'm deputizin' you fellers to do th' pullin'!" sneered the deputy. "Go get him!"

They jumped with such alacrity that he snapped a countermand, and ordered them to get under cover. This they did, Slim stepping on Matt's heels and pleading for part of the blanket.

There came a shout from the northeast. "Hey, Bill! he ain't in there a-tall! Here's fresh hoss tracks leadin' toward Glenn's Canyon!"

"Pacer?" demanded Bill, anxiously.

"Naw; reckon he swapped with his friends."

Another voice was heard. "Here's th' pacer's tracks! Come on, *this* way!"

"Is Baldy in that house?" demanded Bill, sharply. He received no answer, and asked again.

"Mebby he's talkin' to *us*," said Matt.

"To *us?*" asked Reb.

The deputy strained his vocabulary and threatened to make himself hoarse. Out of the profanity the three puzzled punchers winnowed the information that he was speaking to them.

"You tell him, Reb," said Matt.

"Let Slim tell him," retorted Reb.

"Like hell!" snapped Slim, shivering. "Tell him yoreselves!"

"G'wan, Matt," urged Reb.

"G'wan yoreself!" rejoined Matt, indignantly. "You've knowed Baldy longer'n *I* have!"

"That ain't got nothin' to do with it!" retorted Reb. "*They* don't care who knowed him th' longest. *Do* you, deppity?" Reb flinched at the answer and nodded at his companions. "*Told* you he didn't. I'll tell him; *I* ain't scared." He faced the ridge, and at that moment the deputy, who had discovered the tracks of the pacer, let out a roar.

"Here's th' pacer, Bill! He's either in th' house or hidin' out, or he made them tracks for Glenn's Canyon!"

"There's a feller that don't overlook nothin' a-tall," exclaimed Matt.

"Shore!" shouted the man who had discovered the tracks of the black. "Hurry up, or he'll get away!"

"Baldy ain't in th' house, deppity," called Reb. "We ain't seen him to-night."

"Why'n hell didn't you say so before?" snapped the deputy, arising to his full height.

"You never asked us," answered Reb.

There came a rush of hoofs and one by one the members of the posse popped into sight. Clambering into the saddle of the horse led up to him, the leader shook his fist at the three gaping punchers.

"Damn you!" he shouted. "I'll make you fellers pay for this!"

"Take off yore badges," invited Matt, dropping the blanket, which Slim grabbed before it touched the ground, and swinging his Colt.

"We'll pick you up on our way back, for helpin' a fugitive!"

"Aw, go to hell!" snapped Reb.

Matt reached for the blanket, but met with stern resistance.

"Gimme it!" he ordered.

"Leggo!" yelled Slim, grabbing his hand.

"That's *my* blanket!"

"'Tain't!"

"'Tis!"

"Tain't neither!"

They stopped wrangling and grinned at each other as the deputies whirled away toward Glenn's Canyon. Slim surrendered the blanket, rubbed his knees together, and looked dubiously at his companions.

"Can they arrest us?" he asked.

"Mebby; but they can't do nothin' more, anyhow, not while we're such good liars," chuckled Reb, turning toward the house. "Come on: I'm wide awake an' hungry. Let's eat breakfast."

They were sitting down to breakfast when they heard more horsemen coming from the ranch, and they exchanged grins.

"More deppities?" hazarded Slim.

"Taggart an' th' boys," said Matt. "Keep yore eyes an' ears open, an' watch Taggart. Here they come."

The rest of the outfit noisily dismounted and streamed

into the house, the foreman leading. He was calm, unflurried, master of himself, but he seemed to be carrying a heavy load of care.

"Baldy get away?" he asked.

"Easy," answered Matt, reaching for a biscuit. "Swapped for Reb's black. He had run 'em in th' ground with th' pacer. They figgered they had to catch him before he got to th' hills."

A worried look came into the foreman's eyes and he swallowed to moisten his throat.

"Then he got in th' hills all right?" he asked.

Matt grinned. "*They* reckon so." He broke the biscuit and dipped it into the coffee.

"Didn't he?"

"You'll mebby be cross-examined," chuckled Matt, winking. "We'll let it go that he's in th' hills, even if they are full of man-hunters. He's got friends down Valverde way. Speakin' of them deppities, they'll mebby figger on makin' trouble for us three. They reckon we helped him get away, as if we'd do anythin' like that. We say that if they take one they've got to take all of us, even if th' others has to start a ruckus to get arrested. That'll whittle th' outfit down a hull lot more. We're countin' on you explainin' how innercent we are. It'll be all or none."

Milt chuckled, nudged Black Dan, and stepped forward.

"I'm makin' another," he said.

"Majority rules," growled Black Dan, joining him. "You can explain it easy, Chet."

Taggart's frown smoothed out and he laughed.

"Reckon I can. I'm thinkin' I'll have th' laugh on all of you when we get Bud Skinner." He stopped short and looked at Matt. "Baldy might bump inter th' sheriff down at Valverde. Did he forget that?"

"He ain't aimin' to bump inter no officer," answered Matt, easily.

Taggart nodded and moved to the door, where he paused and looked back.

"I'd like to know who told where his bunk was," he growled.

"There ain't no mystery about that," said Matt.

Taggart flashed him a quick look and let his companions file out of the house ahead of him. "Get th' pacer, Dan. Ride him back an' leave yore cayuse in place of th' one Baldy took." He was looking at Matt, and now spoke to him. "So it ain't no mystery?"

"There's lots of folks know that bunkhouse," explained Matt.

The foreman grunted. "Reckon so. By th' way, Skinner; Glenn wants you to get th' mail once a week. Start to-morrow. Bein' a new man, you ain't so likely to be lookin' for fights in town." He nodded at the others and went out.

Milt, leaning lazily against the door jamb, looked after the departing four and spoke without turning his head.

"Matt, yo're a long-headed ol' coyote. What are you figgerin'?"

"Rustlin'."

"Now?"

"Now."

"Who's doin' it?"

"Don't know."

"Got an idear, ain't you?"

"Yes; but idears are like cayuses: they'll get you to yore journey's end, but *they* ain't th' end of th' journey."

Reb grunted. "What you think?"

"I ain't thinkin'; I'm just ridin' one of them cayuses," chuckled Matt. He leaned forward. "I'm bettin' a month's wages near all them Long T's are missin'."

Reb leaned over the table, Slim sat bolt upright, and Milt whirled as if he had been stung.

"We can soon find out!" snapped Milt. "We'll round 'em up right away!"

Matt shook his head. "Not with no watcher on top of th' hump."

Milt swore when this matter was explained to him. He rested a hand on his gun. "All right! We'll take care of th' watcher first!"

"An' show yore hand?" growled Matt. "What'll you do with her? Beat her up?"

"Her!" exclaimed Milt.

The others nodded.

"Then it's th' Peabodys!" he cried. "They're doin' th' rustlin'!"

Matt shook his head. "Ain't so shore. Reckon they're watchin' for th' rustlers as well as for themselves." He turned to Reb and Slim. "Get away before daylight to-morrow. Time it so you'll be ridin' this way from th' Los Altos-Valverde trail. That'll let you cross that Long T section an' do it nat'ral. You

oughta be able to get a good idea about 'em. I'm havin' another look at Glenn's Canyon to-night."

"You got a scheme, Matt," accused Milt. "What is it? What you thinkin'?"

"I got so many fool ideas I ain't thinkin', but just suspectin'. With Baldy loose in th' hills I reckon things'll move fast once they start. Was you all watchin' Taggart? Yes? Then you oughta do some thinkin' for yoreselves. Milt, did you say anythin' to yore uncle about what we're suspectin'?"

"No. He's got trouble enough now, worryin' about that note. No use pilin' it on him." He briefly explained the matter.

"Seven thousan' on th' first," muttered Matt. "Huh! What's that to a ranch like this?" He grinned. "You tell him to quit worryin' about it. He don't have to cross that bridge till he comes to it."

CHAPTER XIX

WORTH KNOWING

MATT scouted outside the canyon and entered it cautiously, working along the south wall, the base of which was broken into ledges and fringed with masses of rock. He did not want to go so far in that the moon's rays would be lost, and finally found a platform of rock rising straight from the canyon bottom to a height of eight or nine feet. Bowlders were scattered about on it and he rolled several of the smaller to the edge and lay down behind them, where he could hear the conversation of any men riding through. After a short wait two men came through from the farther end, speaking in Spanish, and passed within an arm's length of him; but they might as well have been speaking Chinese for all he could understand of their talk.

He watched them until they had crossed the sand patch and then settled down to wait, hoping that some of the Peabodys would ride through. Half an hour passed and then he again caught the sounds of a horse, and froze against his rampart of bowlders. It was coming from the same direction, at a walk, and it stopped frequently for short intervals. Matt's interest quickened at this, for it suggested fear of pursuit.

At last the horse reached the ledge and stopped almost even with him. He heard the rider dismount and go forward on foot. In a few moments there came the click of a pebble near the mouth of the canyon and Matt, hatless, gun in hand, raised his head until he could peer through the crack between two of the bowlders. He could see no one, but he kept his eyes on the south wall, which lay in its own shadow. Was that a movement? He blinked and watched closely; this rider was no innocent passer-by. He was bent on mischief.

Several minutes passed and then Matt caught a flowing bulge in the end of the canyon wall. The straight line of its silhouette against the moonlit plain curved out a little close to the bottom.

"Slidin' along with his back to th' wall," thought Matt. "Scouted outside to see if he could leave th' canyon. If he finds me there'll be fireworks."

The scouting individual came swiftly toward his horse, bent over and running as fast as he could in the loose footing. As he neared the horse the animal started to wheel and its owner, leaping for the dangling reins, cursed it savagely.

Matt tingled. He knew that voice, and a disturbing thought crowded into his mind; could it be that Taggart, despite the scattered and fragmentary bits of evidence to the contrary, was telling the truth and had figured right? If that were so then all the elaborate pieces of Matt's puzzle picture were worthless, all his thinking wrong. To know the truth became of the utmost importance, worth almost any risk. And if

Taggart were right, then this skulker was worth capturing.

He heard the creak of leather, the soft sound of a man landing in a saddle, a low-spoken command to the horse and the animal's hoof-falls under the ledge. Leather chaps brushed the rock, and past a small crack between two bowlders the watcher saw movement. He arose, reached an arm over the bulwarks, and jammed his gun against the shoulder of the rider.

"Up with 'em!" he snapped. "Higher!"

For one instant the rider hesitated, but the pressing muzzle told him it would be better to make a break later on. His hands went slowly up, and the man who had stopped him pushed forward on his stomach, farther over the bowlders, and removed the rider's gun.

"Well, Bud?"

The outlaw started. "Skinner!" he exclaimed.

"Skinner ag'in Skinner. What you doin' here, Bud?"

Bud snarled, showing his teeth. "So yo're after blood-money, after all!"

"Not me! What you doin'? I got you cold."

Bud, keyed to top pitch, waited for his enemy to make a mistake; and he did not intend to wait long. He could not afford to lose the time.

"Got nothin'!" retorted Bud, twisting like a flash and throwing his arms around the other's neck to drag him from the ledge; Matt dropped the six-gun and wound his arms around the outlaw, pushed suddenly against the ledge with his feet just as Bud's legs con-

vulsively gripped the horse to strengthen his purchase, and carelessly drove a spur deep into the animal's side. There was a lurch, a sudden upheaval, and the two men sailed through the air and plowed up the sand. Matt set his teeth and fought to retain his reeling senses, his arms contracting around the outlaw. Gradually his head cleared and he squirmed tighter against the other, his digging toes plowing furrows in the yielding canyon bottom. All at once he realized that he was struggling with an inert, unresisting body.

He arose to his knees, peering at the outlaw. Seizing the limp wrists in a firm grip he bent his head. Bud was breathing. Matt rolled him on his stomach, crossed the outlaw's wrists behind him and tied them together with the man's own neckerchief. Then he used his own kerchief on the outlaw's ankles, and sprang quickly toward the ledge to get the dropped Colt. He was back again in another leap and knelt at the bound man's side, ready to assist the restraining action of the hurried knots.

Bud sighed and stirred, trying to roll over. He rested a moment and then struggled to sit up. "What—where—*damn* you, *Skinner!*"

"I got you cold, Bud."

"You ain't! I'm gettin' out of th' country!" gritted Bud.

"No, you ain't," retorted Matt. "I told 'em I'd let you alone till you fooled around this ranch. You've fooled around it."

"I was only crossin' it!" cried the trussed man, his voice breaking from rage. "Crossin' like I done last

night. I ain't stole a cow since last fall. What good are they? I can't herd 'em, bein' kept on th' jump all th' time; can't drive 'em out of this section because they got to foller certain trails, an' they're all guarded. Vasquez is out after me; Valverde in arms ag'in me. Boulton is down there now, combin' th' hull country. I made things so hot he had to go, so me an' my boys could get away through his home territory. Look here, Skinner; I ain't lyin'!"

"There's been rustlin' goin' on since last fall!" retorted Matt.

"I know it. Dribs an' drabs, an' I'm bein' blamed. I tell you I ain't done none of it. I ain't lyin'!"

"How do I know you ain't?"

"This is how: I know what you said to Boulton when he tried to pump you about me. I know you refused to pick up a thousan' dollars; refused in his face, in th' faces of yore outfit. He told a friend in Valverde. That friend told another. I got it quick. I'm bad egg, Skinner; but I ain't so rotten that I'll return a dirty deal for a good one. I'm tellin' you flat your ranch ain't got nothin' to worry about from me. I'm tellin' you that I'm gettin' tired of being blamed for other folks' rustlin'. Everythin' crooked up here is blamed on me. Taggart an' Howard are howlin' it all th' time. It's breakin' so I can pay Howard myself; an' I'd pay Taggart if I had time. Not bein' able to, I'm leavin' him to another Skinner. Hear me? I'm leavin' him to *you!* I'll make Howard sick to his stomach to-night, an' then jump th' country an' never come back. Don't forget that, Skinner; I'm

leavin' *to-night,* an' *never* comin' back! That's th' truth, but only you will know it. An' that's what makes it worth knowin'. Don't you tell a soul, an' don't you forget it. It'll mebby help you draw fillers to th' best hand you ever held. It'll mebby give you four aces in a most amazin' game. I know more about you than you think I do. I can't put my fingers on a single thing that I can show you; you'll have to take my word. An' I'm givin' my word. Don't keep me here too long, Skinner, or my plans'll go to hell, an' quite some few folks with 'em!"

"What are yore plans?"

"It's best I don't tell you; but it's nothin' ag'in this ranch or anybody connected with it."

"Who you aim to kill?"

"Nobody, less'n they try to capture me. I'm only crossin' this ranch because I didn't have time to go around. We're runnin' by th' watch to-night. I got to meet my boys where I said I would before it's too late. Everythin's planned, to start automatic. If I ain't there to do my part there'll be dead men all over Los Altos by daylight. I gave myself an hour more than I needed; don't hold me longer'n that!"

"Hell!" growled Matt. "What you up to?"

"You don't want to know too much about yore namesake, Skinner!" warned the outlaw. "I ain't shore it was a good play to admit that you spent th' night with me, not with yore name bein' Skinner. You can't afford to be hitched up to an outlaw, an' that's what you'll mebby be."

"Back-firin' is an old trick," said Matt. "Damn

it, Skinner! If I was shore you was tellin' th' truth I'd turn you loose."

"I can only give you th' word of a man you wouldn't sell out!" said the outlaw. "You could 'a' made a thousan' dollars by openin' yore mouth; an' you wouldn't do it. I owe you for bein' free an' alive, even after one of my own men tried to rob you. Even *then* you wouldn't turn me over. You think I'm a skunk? Listen, Skinner: we got to get out of th' country. Our supplies are gone. We're bein' closed in on. We're desperate. I'm tellin' you, man to man, one Skinner to another, that come daylight, me an' my boys will be headin' away never to come back; or we'll be dead. An' listen to this: yore cows are bein' stole in small bunches. They're still in this country because they couldn't be drove out. We ain't stole one since last fall. What could we do with 'em? They'd only help 'em catch us. Don't forget: if you turn me loose I leave this country to-night, *never* to come back. You got brains an' you'll find good use for that information. Can't you see what I mean?"

Matt grunted, and struggled at the knots, helped Bud to his feet and ran him toward his horse, grazing close by. From the ledge he got the outlaw's gun and hastened back with it. To their vast relief the horse was easily caught, and Bud swung into the saddle and held down his hand, gripping that of his namesake.

"Howard an' Taggart allus was close friends, Skinner," said the mounted man. "Howard is money-mad, an' Taggart wants a ranch of his own. *Now* there's more'n money-madness workin' in Howard.

He never forgets an insult or an injury. He's bilin' mad, an' drinkin' hard. Remember what I told you, an' *use yore head!*"

"I will—an' have been—an' *am,*" replied Matt. "Get a-goin'; you've lost more'n half of that hour already. Don't foller th' Los Altos trail too close. It's some travelled after dark. So-long, an' good luck!"

"Same to you," floated back through the moonlight, in which a racing horse and rider grew swiftly smaller.

Matt was satisfied with his night's work and lost no time in getting away from the canyon. When he dismounted at the line house it was after midnight, and he found the house vacant, which pleased him. His three friends would have time to gain the Valverde trail before dawn. About to slip off his boots and get into his bunk, he thought of the prowler of the night before, wondering if he would return. He was curious about the identity of that person, suspecting him to be a Peabody. The footprints the man had left were far apart, suggesting that he had very long legs; and Obadiah's legs were very long. He stepped to the door, closed it, and slid the heavy bar in place, sufficient security against being murdered while he slept.

CHAPTER XX

AVOIDING TROUBLE

MATT awakened at dawn, turned over to go to sleep again, and then remembered that he had to go to Los Altos. He arose, started the fire, and dressed, wondering what startling news he would learn in town; if Bud had told him the truth the ride would be worth while. He slipped back the bar and opened the door, stopping in his tracks as he saw the footprints leading to it. He visualized those of the night before and studied the fresh ones carefully. They were the same.

"All right, Obadiah," he growled. "Next time you come a-callin' at night you'll be surprised."

After breakfast he dragged his equipment to the door and whistled. Pete poked his head out of a tangle and slowly advanced. A few minutes later Matt was riding toward the ranchhouse, and when he arrived and dismounted before the kitchen door he found that the Glenn family had just finished breakfast.

The Chinese cook was standing in the door. "You fella get mail?"

"Yes."

The cook popped back into the house and Randall

Glenn came out. He smiled at his puncher and gave him a packet of letters.

"Here, Skinner," said the ranchman. "Taggart said you would be less likely to start trouble in town than any of the others. Their loyalty had been made inflammable by service and time. As a new man you will not be quite so touchy. Avoid trouble."

Matt nodded. "Anythin' I can get for you?"

"No," answered Glenn, and quickly placed a hand on the puncher's leg. "Milt says you and Baldy were real friendly. There's some pay due him and I'd like him to get it. I'm not asking you any questions except this: should I hand it to you?"

Matt's eyes warmed. "I reckon I heard Reb say somethin' about going' down to Valverde. I'll take th' money to him, if you wants, on a chance of him seein' Baldy." He hesitated. "I'd like to draw ten dollars for myself; mebby Baldy, hidin' out like he is, won't be able to get tobacco an' things. I was figgerin' on makin' him a little present."

Glenn pulled out a roll of bills, stripped several off, and smiled.

"Here," he said, "your ten is with them, for your own use. There's an extra ten for Baldy's tobacco and things. Wonder if I should keep him on the pay-roll?"

"I'll answer that question if you promise not to tell anybody."

"Well, if he's on the pay-roll Taggart will know it."

"Baldy ain't comin' back," sighed Matt, wheeling the bay.

"I could have a separate pay-roll, of my own," suggested Glenn.

"Secret one?" demanded Matt.

"Secret."

"Put Baldy on it for pay an' a half; he's workin' harder for you now than he ever worked before."

"Hem! His work must be extra dangerous."

"Day an' night, extra unpleasant an' extra dangerous," replied Matt. "These remarks belong on that secret pay-roll, too."

Glenn chuckled. "Milt says you know what you are doing. I'll let it ride that way. Don't forget to stop at the post office, Matt!" The wrinkles about the ranchman's eyes and mouth grew deeper. "Give him my regards, and tell him to keep his hat on. His head shines like a looking-glass, and can be seen for miles!"

Matt laughed softly and pressed his knees against the bay, waved to Milt as he passed the bunkhouse, and sent Pete into a lope.

Before he entered the town he sensed that something unusual had taken place in it. Looking down from the hill he could see riders coming in and going out, singly and in groups, and when he passed the adobe jail and swung into the main street he found all the loafers congregated around the bank. It was a heterogeneous crowd, made up of a few punchers in from the ranches on the north and west, several freighters, storekeepers, bartenders, gamblers, half-breeds, poor Mexicans, and bums of several races—in short, the dregs of the town lined the street facing the bank. Man after man looked at this lone rider coming in from the wrong

direction, scowled, and spoke furtively to his neighbour, their voices joining in a low muttering, here and there punctuated by a curse or a sneering laugh.

Matt remembered Glenn's caution to avoid trouble, and rode steadily on, looking neither to the right nor left, forcing a narrow path where grudging shoulders bumped his legs. He dismounted before the post office and looked in the mail window. Flick answered his hail and pawed over a handful of letters, his tongue wagging eagerly.

"Bad time for one of you to come in," he said. "Here's a letter for Miss Agnes. They got 'em out of bed, both of 'em. Mrs. Howard was nigh scared to death. They tied her up an' gagged her, so she couldn't give th' alarm. Here's a letter for Randall. Took Cal an' his paw up to th' bank an' made 'em open th' safe. Cleaned it out. Cal was slow movin', an' they bloodied his nose. Couldn't get in th' little safe because ol' Howard was so scared he couldn't remember th' combination. Seein' it was a little one they let it go, bein' satisfied to take what they had an' get out ahead of trouble. Didn't know th' big safe was more for holdin' th' books in case of fire, an' that most of th' money was in th' little one. It was th' newest an' strongest, that's why. You want to look out, young feller. Los Altos is riled ag'in yore ranch. Most everybody that is of any account is out after 'em; but they say th' gang split north of town."

"Who they reckon done it?" asked Matt, taking the letters. One of them, postmarked Griggs' Valley, made him smile.

"Ain't you *heard?*" demanded the postmaster in great surprise.

"I just rode in."

"Why, Bud Skinner an' his gang, to be shore. There was five of 'em. Got away without a scratch, damn 'em! You an' Baldy are a pair of fools! Forget what I said last time you was in? They scattered north of town, headin' every way. Posse had to split. Here comes one of th' boys now; *listen!*"

A dust-covered rider pulled up and shouted his news to the crowd.

"After they split they come together ag'in, an' drove back th' little posse that was follerin' one of 'em," he explained. "Up 'tother side of Rock Ridge it was. Th' other posses lost th' trails on th' hard ground, an' while they was castin' round, them they was chasin' headed east, got together, an' turned like mad wolves! There was four men in that posse an' they run plumb inter Bud's gang before they knowed they was chasin' more'n one man. Had to get to cover quick. Bud's fellers dropped their cayuses, raked th' brush, an' lit out, hard as they could go. We figger they got a relay planted. They got a big start *now!*"

"How they headin', Rimfire?" called a voice above the hum of the crowd.

"East!" answered Rimfire, dodging into a saloon.

"Circlin' back to th' desert country, east of th' hills!" yelled a puncher.

"Never get 'em once they get back there," said another, swearing. "Three towns has been tryin' it for a

long time. Damned cute, if you asks me, splittin' up an' then bunchin' ag'in to lick a split posse!"

"Hundred 'Leven'll get a rest now," laughed a husky bum. "Bud's been livin' off'n it."

Ripples of laughter ran through the crowd, derisive, sneering.

"To hell with th' Hundred Eleven an' everybody on it," roared a voice, and others growled endorsement.

"There's one in th' post office," shouted a gambler.

Matt stepped to the door and looked the man in the eye. His gaze passed coldly around the massed faces and he walked to Pete, swung into the saddle, and turned the bay. Glenn's words rang in his ears and made him keep his mouth shut. The crowd fell back sullenly to let the horse turn, and then there came an interruption which for the moment held their attention.

A laughing rider pushed through the ring from the other side.

"How much them coyotes get away with?" he asked, loudly.

"Eighteen thousan' dollars!" came the answer.

The newcomer's laughter rang out like a trumpet. "Chicken feed! Chicken feed! Now, if it had been Vasquez——"

"Vasquez!" sneered a bum. "Vasquez! Hear him, fellers! 'If it had been Vasquez'," he mimicked.

"They couldn't open th' real safe," explained a bartender, his soft hands clasped across his prominent stomach.

"Chicken feed!" roared the Vasquez man, waving his hand contemptuously at the thought of such small

change. "An' if they're caught it'll be Vasquez that'll do it for you, too!"

"Th' hell with Vasquez, an' you, too!" snapped a storekeeper.

"Same to you, an' many of 'em!" retorted the proud citizen of Vasquez, leaning from his saddle to exchange glares at close range with the storekeeper. Somebody jumped for him, grabbing him around the neck; then a crowd jumped; dust and growled profanity rolled up from the storm centre, an occasional yelp of pain giving a higher note. Bystanders jumped in to separate the squirming mass, and succeeded. All thought of the Hundred-Eleven puncher was lost in the new excitement, and Matt pushed past the crowd. The Vasquez citizen glared through closing eyes and readjusted his lower lip.

"Chicken feed!" he mumbled, still valiant. "Chicken feed!"

"Hooray fer Vasquez!" shouted someone, laughing uproariously.

"Hooray fer Vasquez!" yelled the crowd, and rushed the alien toward a saloon to make amends.

Matt cantered on down the street and was some distance away when he heard a new outburst of sound from the bank and knew that his escape had been discovered. Simultaneously with this he saw a woman, riding a pinto pacer, come swinging into town past the jail. He glanced back and saw the crowd start after him, jeering and cursing, and the sudden pressure of his knees sent the bay leaping forward.

The pacer was no cow-horse, but Pete had enjoyed a

cow-horse's training, and turned on a space no larger than a dinner plate, dropping squarely across the path of the pinto. Being heavier and having the training of a cow-horse, Pete was not knocked aside, despite the fact that he was struck a solid blow on the flank. The pinto reared, flinging out its sharp small hoofs, and toppled backward. Matt's arm shot out as he whirled Pete around, and he lifted the rider from her saddle and stirrups as the pacer crashed over.

"What do you mean?" snapped Agnes, her eyes blazing, struggling like a fury.

"Los Altos ain't no place for you to-day," said Matt, holding her tighter. "I didn't figger he'd hit Pete so solid."

"Put me down!" blazed his captive, pounding his cheek with her free hand.

"Yes'm," said Matt, soothingly. "After I get that pinto!" and he sent Pete forward like a shot. The pinto hadn't quite made up its mind just where it was, and before it could learn, Matt grabbed the reins. He swung Agnes into her saddle and led the pacer at a canter toward the outskirts of the town.

"Let go!" commanded Agnes, furiously. "Let go instantly!" She raised her quirt, but hesitated.

From behind them jeers and shouts were ringing. "Cal Howard's gal, an' him away!" came a cry louder than the rest from a drunken bum Cal had kept out of jail. A dozen of his friends surged forward, jeering and whooping. "Got a new feller already!" "Caught her kissin' Winters som'ers!" A few racy conjectures followed the laughter at the pun and stung Matt to the

quick, making him wheel and take the quirt from his saddle. The yelling vanguard glanced behind and saw the street strangely deserted, but several heads stuck out from behind the corners of buildings. For a moment they hesitated, and then broke for cover; but they broke too late. Pete charged like a thunderbolt into them, knocking some down; the quirt struck again and again, laying open dirty flesh at each blow. Somebody threw a broken bottle. It struck Matt on the chest and nearly unseated him, but as he swayed he sent Pete into a leap that brought him even with the panic-stricken thrower. Matt leaned down, grabbed the neckband, and bent his back as Pete whirled. The bottle-thrower sailed through the air and crashed against the front of a store. He crumpled and dropped, inert, out of the fight.

A gun roared and a bloody furrow sprang across Matt's cheek. His own gun flashed from the top of its holster and a man reeled out into the street, his smoking weapon dropping from his fingers. He stumbled a few paces and went down, hard hit. Matt whirled his horse, jumped him between two buildings and raced toward the jail, where a white-faced woman clung to a saddle horn and silently prayed for him.

"Ride!" he shouted, angrily. "Ride!"

She swung the pacer through a graceful arc and shot down the trail toward the ranch, Matt pounding behind her. Steadily the pinto drew away, despite all Pete could do, the weaving gait eating into the miles with a smoothness and swiftness not to be found in all that country.

His anger cooling, and seeing that the straggling pursuit was made by pursuers who were not keen to close the gap, even if they could, Matt slipped his rifle into its sheath and gave his attention to the rider ahead. His eyes kindled.

"Pete, there's a girl that can ride," he told his vexed and straining mount. He touched his ear and grinned fondly. "An' she can fight! Glad she didn't have both hands free, you runnin' fool!" He laughed with elation and jeered his horse. "A road-runner made a fool outa you; now that pinto is repeatin' it. Thought you could move, didn't you? *Huh!*"

The pinto slowed and Pete rocked ahead, savagely exulting at his own superior staying power; and then he, too, slowed, filled with disgust; the pinto had not quit—it had been pulled down.

Agnes waited, her face a battleground between expressions: pride, anger, gratitude, friendship, aloofness fought back and forth. She remembered the look in his eyes when he and Baldy had saved her from another disagreeable experience. A flush spread up her throat and shone like fire in her delicate, partly hidden ears; but the eyes she turned on him blazed anew.

"What have you to say for yourself?" she demanded.

"Not a word," replied Matt, removing his sombrero. He pulled the letters from his pocket, handed her the two bearing her name, shoved the others back again, and pressed his knees against Pete, who at that moment was manœuvring for a double-barrelled hay-maker against the pinto's ribs. Pete flattened his ears a little

more, tossed his head, and shot past the pacer to renew the race.

He had been running perhaps ten minutes when he saw a paint head push into his range of vision. One wicked eye, rolling backward, told him the bitter truth: the accursed pacer had caught him! Then he heard voices, and instantly his fool master pulled him down to a prancing, protesting canter, the conceited pinto leering at him and fighting for its bit. Pete's rump worked slowly around for another broadside, but the chucklehead in the saddle spurred him back again. All right; it was a poor and sorry future that was devoid of hope.

"I'm sorry, Matt," said Agnes, looking at the bloody shirt where the bottle had cut through, and at the furrow in his cheek. Her traitorous eyes grew soft and she held out an impulsive, ungloved hand. "It was splendid. I'm ashamed of myself."

"Aw, shucks, Miss Agnes," he mumbled. "'Twasn't nothin', nohow. They was only bums, drunk an' feelin' their oats. Things would 'a' been all right if I hadn't got their attention by stoppin' you like I did."

Her smile made him light-headed, and the hand which still rested in his own was doing unheard-of things to him.

"Matt, you were afraid for me when you stopped me. I could see it in your eyes," and her own fell at what they now saw, but she continued breathlessly: "I acted like a fool and I'm sorry for it."

"Aw, shucks," he muttered, and sucked in his breath with a whistle. He spurred Pete on the off side for an excuse to drop the hand and keep from making a fool of

himself. Pete took it as consent for battle, and whirled like a flash; but the watchful pinto whirled nearly as quickly, and only got it glancing. Then Pete jumped straight up in the air and came down fighting, his sides feeling like pincushions. For a few minutes the air was full of horse and rider, and then the bay, finding he had made another mistake, settled down to all-fours and remained there, jogging along at the side of the pacer, his actions full of guile and his heart full of murder.

Agnes drew a letter from the pocket of her jacket, studied it a moment, opened and read it. Her brows puckered as she considered it, frankly skeptical. She glanced at her quiet companion, and with a quick, restless gesture handed the letter to him.

"Read this, Matt; afterward I'll tell you what it's all about. I don't know what to think."

He found it to be a record of a woman's joy and wonder at a man's regeneration; a proud list of his latest benefactions, an honour roll of mercy and unselfishness; there was a plea for his suffering caused by the continued absence of his son and daughter, and the writer's heart was revealed by every line. He pictured that sweet, sad-faced woman; he saw before him her pudgy, heartless husband, cringing in the pure morning sunlight in a little mountain grove. The man had not been fit to live, and still less fit to die. He handed her the letter and looked inquiringly into her eyes.

"What's it all mean?" he asked.

She told him, picturing the insufferable atmosphere of her father's home, his despicable meannesses, the hatred his family had reaped because of his mad sow-

ing; she painted a soul without a redeeming virtue, a man with the instincts of a buzzard; she told of the unending ordeal that she and her mother and brother had faced day after day, without end; of a family tolerated only because they were feared, secretly hated throughout their little valley; of the alienation of friends, who had become hypocrites with smiling faces and hearts full of contempt and enmity.

A year ago there had come a change, swift, unbelievable, a very cataclysm of the soul; she had read of it in letters ringing with thankfulness, joy, and rekindled love; her mother had written page after page, and each one blotted and blurred with tears. Knowing her father, she had refused to accept the warrants for her mother's faith. Outwardly, perhaps, her father had changed; but both she and Milt cynically waited to learn what their father plotted, expecting each new letter to reveal the trickery. Each new letter but recorded further proofs of the regeneration of William Glenn; new deeds of charity, of justice; new renewals of notes, new reductions of interest, new constructive deeds in the life of the valley.

Agnes rushed on, her words pouring out in a torrent. It had begun soon after a day famous in the recent history of Griggs' Valley, the day a bank robber and murderer had escaped the net spread for him. Late the following afternoon a group of riders had brought her father home, a wreck of a man, hysterical, frantic. He was physically exhausted and they had feared for his mind. All that night he had lain and whispered, dozing fitfully to awaken with expressions of terror.

The next afternoon a man whose note he held had called to make one more plea for time, knowing it was useless, but driven by desperation to save his farm and home. As he stood by the bedside, afraid to speak, William Glenn had raised a shaking hand for the note, called for pen and ink, and with infinite effort had scrawled across it a year's renewal at half the interest. Doubting his senses the farmer had stumbled out to tell of this miracle to all whom he met.

From that day her father slowly had recovered, and not a night found him without some new act of kindness performed. Occasionally he showed fright, which followed the receipt of certain letters. One of these his wife had recovered from the waste basket and pieced together. It was a crude drawing of a gibbet and a dangling noose. These came at irregular intervals, from different parts of the country; but they gradually lost their terror for William Glenn. Each new drawing left him calmer, and the last had brought a smile to his face. He showed it to his wife and ordered it framed and hung over his bed, where he saw it night and morning without flinching.

"He and Mother have written for us to come home, Milt and I," Agnes said at the conclusion of the story. "I suppose we should go; but hatred and contempt such as ours cannot be changed easily, and Uncle Randall is very good. I've been on the verge of going several times, but Milt is granite and only sneers. He had more to put up with than I did—I don't know *what* to do."

Matt's face was stony. He was as rigid as a figure of

bronze. In his heart hatred flamed and a sneering skepticism held the portal undismayed. Pete answered to the grip of the knees with a forward surge, but found himself pulled back again with savage energy. The minutes passed unheeded, Matt cold and wordless; Agnes, groping and silent. She looked at her stern companion, read the words he would not say, and compressed her lips with determination, looking ahead along the trail, her face as stern as his.

He stirred, sighed, turned to face her. "Agnes, I don't know what to tell you. I reckon it's somethin' you've got to figger for yoreself. I ain't a fit judge to pass sentence on anybody that's made *yore* life a misery; I'm only fit to be th' executioner!"

"Matt," she whispered, and placed her hand quickly, gently on his arm, catching her breath at the look in his eyes. "Why, Matt—I—I——" she faltered. Their eyes were searching each other to the soul, their faces softened. Agnes gasped. Her quirt arose and cut down in thoughtless cruelty. The pinto quivered with agony and shot ahead like a living bolt, Pete savagely thundering after. The miles whistled past, a gray-white blur; the ranchhouses seemed to spring from the side of the little hill. Figures ran from the bunkhouse door, waving wide-brimmed hats and cheering as the racing pinto flashed past the corral and slid to a stop at the ranchhouse door. The thundering bay, his great heart nearly cracking under the task set by his thoroughbred will, whirled into sight over the last ridge and swung with slowing speed toward the bunkhouse, stopping with physical joy and mental reluctance before the

staring group. They had thought it a race for the love of racing; but the blood on the rider's cheek and shirt wiped the grins from their faces.

"What's th' trouble, Matt?" shouted Milt, glancing hurriedly about the range.

"It's th' end of a—a game," grunted the rider, swinging down.

"Who done that to you?" persisted Milt, his eyes narrowed.

"Bud Skinner," answered Matt, saying the first name that popped into his head, and passed into the bunkhouse, leaving the little group in a heated discussion.

Milt stuck his head in the door to ask more questions, dodged a boot, ducked back, and scratched his chin in perplexity. He had glimpsed his friend Matt hurriedly scrawling a letter on the bunkhouse card table. He could not see that his friend's labours resulted in a crude drawing of a gibbet, without the customary noose; an addressed envelope sealed and hurriedly shoved into another, to be sealed in turn. He did not see the smile that broke through the rugged hardness of the writer's face, a smile from the soul, a smile like the rays of the sun bursting through black storm clouds. Matt shoved the letter into his pocket, where lay a heavy seal ring, and turned toward the door, smiling at the hectic conversation going on outside it. Taggart had ridden up and was learning about it.

A shadow fell across the threshold and Matt stopped as the foreman came in. Taggart had heard, as yet, nothing about the bank robbery; nothing of Bud's hard-

pressed flight eastward. He looked at Matt, a triumphant gleam in his eyes. The angry conversation outside the house was moving toward the corral, the voices growing weaker and less distinct.

Taggart laughed grimly. "You'll mebby take more stock in what I been sayin' about that damned namesake of yourn. *I* saw Bud Skinner this mornin', down on our southwest section. If I'd 'a' been on yore cayuse, or th' pinto, I'd 'a' *got* him. There's somethin' for you to chew on!"

The foreman turned away, laughing ironically, and missed the stiffening of his puncher, the exultant light that flared in Matt's eyes.

"That's shore somethin' to chew on," admitted Matt, slowly. "I'm beginnin' to figger you know what yo're talkin' about."

"An' *I'm* admittin' yo're beginnin' to get some sense," replied Chet, passing into the kitchen.

Matt drew a deep breath and went toward the outer door. Bud had told him to use his brains; he was using them. At the corral he bumped into Milt, and slid a letter into his friend's pocket.

"Mail that, Milt, on th' quiet, first chance you get." He whistled to Pete, who grudgingly obeyed the summons. "Watch Chet's face when he learns that Bud Skinner an' his gang robbed th' Los Altos bank before daylight this mornin', headed north an' east, an' got plumb away. Watch him, Milt; he'll near turn green!"

Milt's jaw dropped. "What?" he gasped.

Matt swung into the saddle. "If I ain't careful

somethin' unpleasant is goin' to happen to me. *Watch him!*"

"What you mean?" demanded Milt, his faculties returning with a rush, but Matthew Skinner was cantering off in the direction of the line house, buried in thought.

CHAPTER XXI

WHITTLIN'

MATT returned to find Reb and Slim bursting with news. In their ride from the Valverde-Los Altos trail they had not seen a Long T animal. Their search necessarily had been restricted, but they had passed through sunken pastures which were favourites with the purchased cattle. Even the number of Hundred Elevens was too small to suit them.

"Baldy signalled?" asked Matt, stirring out of his reverie.

His companions shook their heads.

"Reckon there's too many man-hunters in th' hills," said Reb. "There ain't no sign that that posse come back this way."

"He had enough supplies to last him a couple of weeks," said Slim.

Matt nodded. He told them about the bank robbery, and the attitude of the town toward the ranch. Their curious looks at the condition of his cheek and shirt disappeared, and wrath took hold of them.

"That town needs cleanin' up," growled Reb.

"Yes," replied Matt. "Th' hills bein' so full of man-hunters will hold us back. Soon as things settle down so Baldy can ride around we'll get action. Them Long

T's ain't left this country. I *know* that. We've heard Bud Skinner blamed steady for 'most everythin', but he ain't rustled a cow off this ranch since last fall, when that reward was put on him. Men from three towns was out after him. Most quit soon enough, but th' best stayed with it, an' kept him jumpin'. You reckon he'd be fool enough to rustle over here, when he couldn't get back ag'in except by drivin' through one of them two canyons? What would he do with them if he got 'em? Every outgoin' trail's been watched since last fall. That's why I know our cattle ain't left th' country. None of them that's been after Bud has stumbled across any stolen cattle. Don't that mean they ain't been held anywhere in *his* part of th' country? Yet, if they went through Glenn's or Striped canyons, they'd have to pass his country an' them man-hunters."

"Where'd they go, an' who took 'em?" demanded Reb.

"Across th' ridge, south of th' hump," answered Matt. "We'll find who's been takin' 'em before long. There's trouble comin' my way when th' news of th' bank robbery reaches th' bunkhouse. If I only lose my job I'll be lucky."

"Because yore name's Skinner?" growled Slim, his eyes narrowed.

"Because Chet made a hell of a big mistake this afternoon," replied Matt. "He's goin' to make more of 'em, *too!*" He explained the matter to them. "I'm th' only man he told that to. He's got to stop my mouth. I'm tellin' you in case he succeeds. Listen!"

He leaped to the end wall of the house, from which

position the door opened away from him. The horse stopped before the door. They heard the rider drop to the ground and then the door flew open and Milt bounced in.

"Where's Matt?" he cried, caught sight of the puncher, and jumped for him with an outstretched hand.

Matt relaxed and smiled. Milt grabbed his hand and pumped it while he thumped his friend's shoulder and talked at top speed. Agnes had told him of her ride to town. After the excitement died down Milt stepped back, grinning, and regarded his friend.

"Why didn't you tell us about th' bank robbery?" he demanded. "We didn't hear about it till just before I left."

"Didn't have time," answered Matt. "Then Taggart said somethin' that made me keep still. I got him in a flat-footed lie, like I knowed I would if I waited." He chuckled. "Bet Chet's interested in that robbery, an' worried sick!"

"What was th' lie?" asked Milt. He listened intently, his face slowly changing, and at the conclusion he asked: "What'll he do?"

"Ain't shore," answered Matt. "Set in th' door, Milt. It's a nice moonlight evenin', Reb, an' we won't need no lamp. Blow it out. I oughta be in th' hills with Baldy, an' I'm figgerin' somethin's goin' to happen to me right soon. My name's Skinner, an' I spent a night with Bud. Men have been fired for less. If they ain't fired, they've chucked up an' gone ramblin' for a new job."

"I can't believe Chet's on th' rustle," growled Milt.

"Nobody's askin' you to, nor told you he was," replied Matt. "We only know th' rustlin' ain't stopped, an' we're goin' to find out about it."

"Chet wouldn't hang me," persisted Milt.

"Chet didn't hang you," grunted Matt. "Obadiah an' some of his friends did that."

"Chet wouldn't let Long Jack be drug from a stirrup. They was great friends."

"He wasn't drug from no stirrup," growled Matt. "I'm figgerin' Obadiah tied that funny knot around yore neck. Me an' Baldy hung a hangman's noose down in front of his door, an' he didn't lose much time smellin' around this house. Only way he could reckon any of us done it was because he had a damned guilty conscience: furthermore, a man that knowed sailor's knots tied that one, an' Obadiah's old man was a sailor. There's things goin' on that you don't know. One of 'em is how th' Peabody fambly makes a livin'. Me an' Baldy'll dig up a lot of things. We've got some signals to work with Reb an' Slim, if they're needed, but Reb an' Slim, since Taggart's gettin' worried, may be ordered away from here an' Gage put in their place. You, bein' a nephew, can wander around as much as you want. In case that happens, you get an abidin' affection for this part of th' ranch, an' watch th' top of th' hump. If they can use it for a watch tower we can use it for a signal post. These are th' ones we've agreed on; remember 'em, an' don't act lazy after you see one of 'em," and he told his eager auditor what he should memorize.

Milt nodded, his lips working silently as he repeated the instructions.

"Milt, I'm leavin' you to fix things with Sheriff Boulton if we have to have him. Not a man from Los Altos can be used. Don't forget that; not a man!"

"But he's in Valverde," protested Milt. "Reckon I better hunt him up?"

"He'll be in Los Altos *pronto* when he hears about Bud," replied Matt. "Come to think of it, if you went to Valverde it'd make folks figger you was huntin' Baldy. You'd be follerin' my trail, too. We'll think this over."

"Suppose yo're tracked?" asked Reb, anxiously.

Matt thought for a moment. "I know a way to get around that, but I reckon I better go straight to Valverde. Won't be so suspicious. That'll save Milt huntin' up Boulton. Who's his deppity down there?"

"Jim French," answered Milt.

"Know him well?"

"Betcha; he's all right." Milt laughed. "He was th' red-head in Vasquez th' night you made them coyotes sing 'Home Sweet Home.'"

Slim was getting restless, and rolled up a sleeve.

"Let's have a game of poker. There's four of us, an' I'm needin' money to carry me over till pay-day," he said.

"If we stay in th' house an' light th' lamp," said Matt, "there ain't goin' to be no talkin' about anythin' that's worth talkin' about. Not a single word."

"Nobody'll have time to talk while *I*'m in th' game," boasted Slim. "Table stakes?"

"What's th' matter with you?" demanded Milt. "Table stakes! Don't you know it's been a long time

since pay-day? Penny ante is more my size, with a five-cent limit. Table stakes, hell!"

"Who ever heard of pennies in this country?" snorted Slim.

"Don't need pennies," retorted Milt. "We got beans, ain't we? Twenty-five beans makes two-bits, don't they? Get th' beans, Matt. Light th' lamp, Reb. Bring this box when you come, Slim."

Slim leaned against the door casing and kicked the box over the stove.

"Able to totter to th' table?" he asked, in scorching irony.

"Can you hold yore own cards, Milt?" asked Reb in great solicitude. "Where'n hell *is* th' lamp?"

"Light a match, somebody, so he can find th' lamp," said Milt, reaching for papers and tobacco. "An' hold it till I get this rolled."

The game held their thoughts, the smallness of the stakes lost sight of. Hand followed hand, the beans going one way and another; the lamp, turned too high, began to smoke; a face peered in at the east window and was not observed, and the quiet steps outside were unheard. To the low chuckle from the door the players reacted differently. Milt's hand streaked to his six-gun as he slid sidewise off the seat; Reb stiffened as his hand dropped below the edge of the table; Slim leaped backward and to one side, and Matt raised his eyes, expecting to see Taggart in the door. All were relieved and surprised when Baldy's identity sifted through their minds.

"Got lonesome," said Baldy, stepping inside.

Matt turned down the smoking lamp and blew it out, swearing under his breath.

"Just because Baldy's loco ain't no reason for us to be," he said. "He'd look nice to somebody outside, him settin' here in th' light, in this house, when he's supposed to be 'round Valverde. There's worse things than bein' lonely, Baldy!"

"Come to tell you I ain't had no chance to find nothin' out," protested Baldy. "There's too many ridin' around in th' hills."

"Not havin' signalled, we guessed both them things," retorted Matt. "Nice moonlight night to be ridin' here, visitin' yore friends!"

"Nice moonlight night to hide a cayuse an' wiggle a hundred miles on my belly," growled Baldy. "By th' time I got through scoutin' I felt sorry for snakes."

"You stay in here, in th' dark," ordered Matt, going to the door. "Come on, fellers; it ain't nat'ral for us to be settin' in here without a light. Outside with you, an' set ag'in th' wall, accordin' to habit. Baldy, you say what you got on yore mind, which can't be much since you ain't got nothin' to say, an' streak back where you come from before *others* are scoutin' around, feelin' sorry for snakes. I'll be joinin' you *pronto*, under th' east side of th' hump, like we said."

"I really come in to get some tobaccy," replied the two-gun man. "I'm all out of it."

"I'm agreein' smokin' is a bad habit," growled Matt, sitting with his back against the corner of the doorway. He listened while the man inside pawed along the shelf for the sacks he had seen when entering. A grunt of

satisfaction told that the tobaccoless pilgrim had found what he sought, and a moment later the flare of a match made Matt writhe. "Milt," he said, sharply. "Roll another cigarette, change places with me, an' smoke, blowin' it in th' house. Chet's no fool, an' if he comes to-night he mustn't be given nothin' to put a peg in."

"What's bringin' him out here to-night?" asked the two-gun man.

Matt covered the subject in two sentences, and then ripped out a curse. "Baldy, drop that cigarette, grind it to powder, an' get behind th' curtain in th' corner! Here comes someone from th' ranch, an' I'm bettin' it's Taggart! He couldn't wait till mornin', damn him! Join in with me, soft, so he won't know we just started," and he began to sing, the others joining in low voices.

"It's whoopin' an' yellin' an' drivin' th' dogies;
Oh, how I wish you would go on;
It's whoopin' an' punchin' an' go on, little dogies,
For you know Wyomin' will be yore new home."

"You shouldn't come in strong like that, Slim," chided Matt as the horseman neared them. "You ain't got th' right idear. Here: 'For you know Wyomin' will be yore new h-o-m-e.' See what I mean? Sorta sad an' sorrerful."

"Anybody listenin' to you will be sad an' sorrerful," retorted Slim with feeling. "I been singin' that song since I could crawl. Hell! What *you* know about singin'?"

"Leave it to Chet," said Matt, arising, and informing

the dismounting foreman about the controversy. "Who's right, Chet?"

"That all you've got to worry about, *Skinner?*" demanded the foreman, sharply, looking at Matt with suspicious eyes, letting his hand rest carelessly on his gun as he leaned forward, unconscious of the gun barrel projecting from the soiled curtain in the corner of the room at his right. It was dark in the house and he stood in the moonlight. "Folks has been talkin' about greasers," he said. "I wonder if them greasers was told where Baldy's bunk was, an' how it was that Baldy was wanted so quick after a *Skinner* got a job on this ranch?"

"Don't stop there, Taggart," Matt said, coldly.

"Ain't aimin' to," retorted the foreman, tense and alert. "Baldy was th' best fightin' man on th' ranch. Even Bud Skinner wouldn't have a chance ag'in him in an even break; Long Jack was scared away; Milt was strung up, an' near died. That would 'a' made two less in this outfit. Slim was laid for in th' arroyo. Then it came Baldy's turn. Somebody that knowed about him fixed it up with them deppities to get him. They fixed it right after they knowed he was bein' kept close to th' ranchhouse to keep an eye on Miss Agnes. Th' deppities knowed where to find his bunk, an' went straight to it in th' dark. Baldy's gone an' dassn't come back; Long Jack ain't been seen since. I don't know who was slated to go next. They're whittlin' this outfit slow but shore. What you know about it, *Skinner?*"

"I know you've made a mistake," answered Matt, calmly and enigmatically.

"I'm admittin' it. It was made th' day I hired you!"

"I'm admittin' that, too," rejoined Matt, grimly.

"What you ridin' nights for, around Glenn's Canyon, that allus has been a sore spot on this ranch?" demanded Taggart. "Gage says you been holin' up in th' canyon. Honest folks ain't ridin' nights!"

"I'm admittin' *that*, too," retorted Matt. "We'll let it lay. Baldy was well knowed. Everybody seemed to know he'd done somethin' somewhere. 'Tain't strange that them Los Altos coyotes, hatin' him like they do, would try to trail him back to where he come from an' learn about him. He told me there was a thousan' dollars on his head. Besides, th' credit for gettin' him, an' squarin' up old grudges, that thousan' would interest any deppities. Yore bunkhouse ain't no secret; anybody can ride up an' learn all about it. As for ridin' nights, I was anxious to ketch th' next rustlers that come here. Rustlin' has stopped now, but there's allus a new beginnin' with cattle thieves. You can't fasten a thing on me, Taggart, an' you know it!"

"That's th' only reason I ain't turnin' you over!" snapped Chet. "Los Altos hates us so much that no jury would find you guilty unless I had so much proof that they wouldn't dare to pass it over. Everybody would sympathize with you an' it'd make more trouble for us. Glenn figgered you'd be a good man for Long Jack's place, an' I hired you. Now I'm figgerin' you ain't fillin' Long Jack's place good enough; he left us. You oughta leave us, too. I hired you, an' now I'm firin' you. Get yore traps together an' clear out at daylight. You didn't have no grub with you when

you come, an' you ain't takin' none when you leave. Here's yore pay; clear out!"

"Give him grub, Chet!" interposed Milt.

"Not a bite! Th' more grub he has th' longer he can hang around here, spyin' for Bud!" retorted the foreman, smiling to himself at how cleverly he had made it necessary for Matt to leave the range and go where he could procure food.

"Wait a minute!" snapped Milt, pushing from the wall.

The words were so loud and clipped so closely that Taggart instinctively faced the speaker, and saw his mistake too late. Matt's gun leaped from its holster and swung up. It was a beautiful draw. The end of the barrel barely cleared the top of the sheath and the handle dropped as the muzzle swung up. The light was strong enough for all to see that the hammer was thumbed and the trigger held back.

"Drop that!" snapped Matt, sliding forward as the foreman obeyed. He nodded, kicked the weapon to one side and went after it, tense and alert. Picking it up he glanced swiftly at Milt. "Too late, Milt," he growled. "Chet's made a mistake, but I don't like th' way he shot off his mouth. Taggart, you made yore play; don't change yore mind. I'd ruther be without a job than work under a fool like you. Th' first man pullin' a gun sends Taggart to hell," he warned. "I'm holdin' 'em back with my thumbs! Milt, I done you a favour once; do me one?"

Milt was surly, suspicious. "Depends on what it is," he growled.

"Saddle Pete, lead him up to th' door an' put my stuff on him," answered Matt, his eyes on the group.

"Skinner's a Skinner," muttered Milt, shuffling away. He returned with the horse, dragged the equipment from the house, and in a moment he stepped back. "All ready," he growled.

"Bein' a Skinner," said Matt, backing to the animal, "I ain't takin' too much faith in you not reportin' me to th' deppities. You made another mistake: no jury in this county would bring in a verdict of not guilty—for a *Skinner*." An expression of thinly concealed apprehension, followed by one of relief, passed across his face. It was obvious that he was glad to get away before they changed their minds. He bumped into the horse and sidled around it, not for an instant taking his eyes from the foreman. Climbing into the saddle behind a levelled gun, he spoke to Pete and took up the reins.

"If I meet Boulton I'll tell him there's a damn fool actin' nat'ral on th' Hundred 'Leven," he sneered. "I'll tell Bud th' same thing, 'though I reckon it won't be news to either."

Pete disliked to back, being a straightforward animal, and showed it frankly; but foot by foot he neared the rim of a deep wash, and stopped suddenly as a rear hoof felt for something more substantial than air. He was whirled swiftly on the very edge and leaped into the gully as his master hurled the foreman's six-gun into the scrub. Pete thereupon emulated a jackrabbit through the brush, zigzagging from opening to opening and running hard. He whirled on in the moonlight,

and as he turned into the Valverde trail Matt pulled him to an easy lope and laughed long and hard.

At Valverde he found a place to get some sleep and a breakfast and in the middle of the forenoon he hunted up Deputy Sheriff Jim French and found him saying good-bye to Sheriff Boulton. The three men walked off and held a long and earnest conversation, many gestures aiding the expression of their thoughts and emotions. French wandered back to his office, and Sheriff Boulton, again wearing his poker face, set out for Los Altos. Matt watched the sheriff's back for a moment and then turned to get Pete, to leave him in a blacksmith shop highly recommended by both the officers. The bay was to have a new set of shoes, to change his identity as read from his tracks.

CHAPTER XXII

MORE DISCOVERIES

MATT finished his supper in Valverde, bought all the cooked beans the restaurant had, and left town after nightfall. When he drew rein it was on the edge of a small clearing under the east side of the hump, and he heard a chuckle from the brush. Baldy's head and shoulders pushed up into sight and the two-gun man thrashed through the scrub.

"Yo're makin' too much noise," said Matt, his gun going back into the holster.

"Nobody around," replied Baldy. "I climbed that hump afoot an' I've been watchin' it ever since. Foller me to camp," and he led the way over the rocks and down into a deep and narrow ravine whose sides were covered with a fair growth of timber. Matt glanced up through the branches to see if he could make out the hump in the moonlight, and found he could not. Then he gave his attention to following his guide and after some minutes rode out on a small grassy pasture. He glanced around and shook his head.

"We're breakin' this camp right now," he said. "Too close to 'em. Th' smoke from th' fire can be seen from th' hump, an' if th' wind's right it can be smelled by any one passin' outside."

"I've only been here to-day," explained his companion. "Got a better place southeast of here." He got his horse and threw the saddle on it. "What you aim to do?"

"Strike south an' find a way across th' ridges, around th' ends of th' other canyons. We'll poke around in each an' go on to th' next. You seen any pack-train?"

"Saw one night before last, headin' east. It'll be goin' east agin' to-night. Comes one way one night an' goes back th' next. Couldn't make out what they tote, it was so far away."

"We'll go to that other camp of yourn an' try to find a way over th' hills," said Matt. "Then we eat supper an' come back, on foot, for a look at th' pack-train. That'll lead us straight an' mebby save a lot of huntin'."

Baldy was soon packed and riding ahead. They pushed over the bottom of the ravine where the moonlight was stronger, turned sharply up a branch ravine and followed it to another small pasture, its grass green and rich because of a spring. Matt grunted with satisfaction as he swung down and turned to strip off the saddle.

"This is more like it," he said, pushing the picket stake into the soft ground. He glanced at the sheer east wall. "If we use dry wood there won't be much chance of anybody discoverin' us." He produced the cooked beans. "Better use these up first."

Baldy picked up the coffee pot and started with it toward the spring.

Breakfast over, they mounted and rode diagonally up the east side of the ravine, keeping to the timber as much

as possible and worrying about being seen from the hump. The top of the ridge was narrow and they plunged down the other side into another ravine which led eastward. It grew deeper and wider and became a sizable valley before the mountains drew together to form a sheer-walled canyon. Through this they rode and came out into one of the larger valleys. It must have been ten miles long, and at its northern end its sides grew steeper and steeper. From where they were they could get a good view of it for its entire length, and one glance sent them on again, across it, to find a way up the other ridge.

"No cattle in here," grunted Matt. He glanced over his shoulder, saw the tops of the stunted trees on the hump, and checked his companion. "We're goin' back. If anybody's watchin' they'll spot us. We'll try th' pack-train first, an' if that don't tell us anythin', then we'll tackle this by moonlight." He studied both slopes, and pointed. "There's th' way. We'll keep to th' west sides of these valleys, an' by pickin' our way across th' divides we mebby can do it in daylight. Wish we'd brought our stuff with us. If we had we could stay in this valley, workin' down toward th' north end, an' be that much farther east when th' pack-train comes along. No tellin' how much walkin' we're in for."

"We got time to move th' camp," replied Baldy, wheeling.

Matt nodded. "Farther we get from that hump th' better I'll like it."

When darkness fell the new camp had been tidied, the horses staked on good grass, and the two scouts lay

prone behind the bowlders outside the mouth of the canyon. Below them and several hundred yards away lay the trail used by the pack-train and other domestic animals. The stars were out and a brilliant moon made a fairyland of the main valley.

"There's been more folks ridin' out of here than in," Baldy said. "Yesterday a dozen went toward Striped Canyon, an' not three come back. Huntin' Bud, you reckon?"

Matt shook his head, his eyes on the black crack in the hills where Striped Canyon split the encircling walls. A pin-point of light sprang out against the black panel, rising and falling. It showed for a moment and then went out. Matt gripped his companion and squirmed out to where he could look eastward along the trail. He was just in time to see the last flicker of an answering light in the other end of the outer valley.

It seemed a long time before they heard the pack-train and saw it moving along the trail. As before, there were five horses, two carrying loads and the other three being ridden. They went past at a brisk walk, suggesting that the loads were light. Matt and his companion slipped along after the train, keeping among rocks and bowlders. For the next two hours they walked, stumbled, and ran, at times having to fall back to keep from being seen, and at other times, the cover improving, they worked up close. They passed three canyons leading back into steep-walled valleys and then crossed the main valley where it shrunk greatly in width, and paused before another canyon, this one on the north side.

"Won't foller in there," growled Matt. "They shore got a guard set. We'll do some climbin' an' look down on 'em."

They reached the top of the ridge and worked over to the edge. Below them were lights, and they could make out several buildings, but could not see what they were. No cattle were in sight, and this endorsed what Matt had been thinking. The Peabody family was in a separate business, bound to the other by the desire for mutual protection. He remarked that they would have to wait for daylight, and led the way from the edge to get some sleep.

The sun awakened them and in lieu of breakfast they pulled in their belts and went back for another look into the valley.

A sizeable wheat field lay below and there was a corral, a makeshift grist mill operated by a horse at the end of a long pole, a still house, and a rough bunkhouse with a cook shack attached. A pile of flat casks stood near the still house and the two younger Peabodys were carrying them into it. Matt sniffed at the faint odour of sour mash and nudged his companion.

"Boulton's puzzle is solved," he grunted. "Ours ain't, for there ain't been no cows in this valley."

"How you know there's cows in any of th' canyons?" asked Baldy, scratching his head. "This explains th' lookout on th' hump, th' reason th' Peabodys live where they do, how they make a livin', an' why there's so much travellin' nights through Glenn's Canyon. Mebby there ain't nobody else in here, since th' man-hunters left."

"There wasn't no man-hunters in here," growled Matt. "They only pretended they was man-hunters, to keep Boulton from gettin' restless. Who flashed th' answerin' light last night?" he demanded. "Where's all our missin' cows, that can't get out of th' country? Why did Long Jack quit, Milt get strung up, you chased, an' me fired? Why did Taggart lie about seein' Bud? There's cows in these hills an' we got to find 'em."

"All right; let's do it, an' then eat," replied Baldy, pulling in his belt another hole.

"Got to be careful," warned Matt, wriggling back. "Dassn't cross th' main valley. It'll be hard work, an' mebby take a long time."

"I'd ruther work hard an' get through, before my stomach thinks my mouth is dead."

Matt led the way over the ridge, finding no deep valley on the far side, but a succession of hollows scantily covered with scrub. Working eastward past the end of the main valley they got around it and approached the easternmost canyon, which opened almost opposite the one used by the Peabodys. Exercising caution, they chose a patch of scrub which ran to the edge of the cliff and worked forward in it, crawling the last few yards. Baldy had pushed ahead and when he came to the rim he muttered a curse. Matt joined him and chuckled.

Below lay a long, narrow valley, growing wider as it extended farther from the chasm connecting it to the main valley outside. A trickle of water wandered down the middle, here and there swelling into pools and

making little swamps of a deeper, richer green. The grass was plentiful and over it wandered a fair sized herd.

"Close to five hundred," growled Matt. "I can see that many, an' there's more in th' brakes an' ravines. Can you make out any brands?"

"No; but there's a cow right down here that's turnin' as it grazes," answered Baldy. They watched the animal and became vexed by its perversity. Half a dozen times it started to swing around, but stopped short. Matt nudged his companion as another cow moved out from behind a huge bowlder. Inch by inch it advanced as it cropped tuft after tuft. As the brand was about to come into sight the animal stopped, chewing placidly. Then the other cow started for the creek and let them look their fill at the mark on its hide.

"Window Sash!" grunted Baldy, angrily.

Matt nodded. "Workin' both our brands into one."

The cow by the bowlder moved ahead again and the two men exchanged looks as the Long T brand came into view.

Baldy swore and wriggled back, put on his sombrero, and waited for his friend. "Yo're right," he growled. "We'll signal Milt an' then eat. It's goin' to be a long, hard walk from here on an empty stomach!"

"If we go now it'll be a longer, harder walk," replied Matt, gazing down the length of the valley. "We can't go back th' way we come, not in daylight. We got to go south, 'round th' ends of all these valleys. It'll be a good thing, Baldy, because we'll learn th' best way in from th' rear, an' if cayuses can make it."

Baldy groaned and pressed his stomach, but arose and followed his companion southward parallel with the valley, keeping well back from the rim. Occasionally they crept to the edge and looked down, discovering more cattle, learning that there were six men with the stolen herd, and memorizing the layout. Of particular interest was a log house on the side of a ravine. It was built against a wall of rock which ran straight up for about eighty feet, and it faced on a gentle slope, its one door looking out across the ravine to the opposite bank not thirty paces distant. There was a small window in the end facing the spies, and it could be taken for granted that another window pierced the other end wall. Matt lay prone for several minutes, taking in every detail of the house and its surroundings, and reproved his companion for his anxiety to move on.

"This is worth lookin' at," he said. "So far we ain't seen no dog, an' if there was one it would 'a' showed itself before now. Anythin' funny strike you about that house?"

Baldy cogitated a moment. "Only that it ain't set just right to hold off a gang. It's too close to th' other bank. Couple of good men over there could keep th' whole bunch prisoners. They should 'a' put it at this end."

"Anythin' else?"

"Seein' that it's got a good layer of clay on th' roof an' can't be set on fire from above—*huh! I* see it!" He was looking intently at the top of the wall behind it which formed a ledge on which half a dozen large bowlders lay. "It's a death trap, Matt.'"

"It is. Come on; we got a long way to go."

Neither ever would forget that walk. Night found them plodding doggedly on along a way passable for horsemen, dipping and climbing, twisting and turning. They struck straight across the intervening valleys and before midnight reached their camp. After they had saddled their horses each grabbed a pan of the ready-cooked beans and a few biscuits and rode toward the hump. Reconnoitring, Baldy waited below while Matt worked up the steep path to the top, found it unwatched and hurried down again. They conversed at some length and parted, Baldy going back to the camp and Matt riding across the ridge, bound for the line house, having so much to explain that he found signals useless.

CHAPTER XXIII

SETTING THE TRAP

MATT left his horse in a ravine and went ahead on foot, circling around the building and investigating every bit of cover. He was pleased when he found three hobbled horses grazing in a depression, for they belonged to Milt, Reb, and Slim. He crept through the cover nearest the house, reached the rear wall and, removing his boots, slipped around to the front, stopping within an arm's length of the open door. The sounds made by the sleepers were familiar except for an occasional note, and this note bothered him because it might mean that Taggart was inside. What would he say if this were so? He thought a moment and then nodded; he would demand proof or exoneration of the foreman's suggestive remarks. He put on his boots, struck a match, and went to the table to light the lamp. At a sudden creaking of a bunk and a curt command he held the match close to his face and grunted his name.

Rustlings and creakings from the other bunks followed and three pairs of sleepy eyes regarded him first curiously and then with a rush of interest. Taggart was not there. Questions poured into his ears, and he chuckled as the three men joined him at the table.

"Reckon I can answer you better by tellin' what we found," he said, and told about his and Baldy's activities. Their responses were pugnacious and straightforward, all beginning with a hasty journey to the bunkhouse to confront the foreman.

"Won't do," objected Matt. "We ain't connected either our foreman or Cal Howard with that herd, an' we got to do that before we can call for a showdown. I'm leavin' that to Milt and Boulton. Reb, you an' Slim have got another job. Just about th' time Milt reaches th' bunkhouse you two ride through Glenn's an' Striped canyons an' call on th' Peabodys. Here, this is th' idea for th' whole play," and for half an hour he held their interest. "I'm goin' back to Baldy, an' get set for th' clean-up. Don't let Boulton cut into this a-tall. Every eye in Los Altos will be on him, an' th' first move he makes will tip off our hand. Tell him to keep busy on th' Bud Skinner end. You all know what ye're to do? Dead shore? All right; I'm goin' back."

"What about th' watcher on th' hump, if one's there?" asked Milt, anxiously.

"Let her watch! Th' more she watches th' safer they'll feel till it's too late!" answered Matt. "You fellers play th' hands you've got, an' play 'em *good*. So-long!"

At the bunkhouse after breakfast Chet Taggart was mending his saddle where the threads had ripped out. Black Dan had roped his mount from the little herd in the corral and had ridden off to his assigned range. Gage had tarried to talk a little with his foreman. Both

looked up as Milt raced to the house and threw himself off the horse and through the door almost in one motion. The horse was foam-flecked, and the rider was quivering with anger and excitement.

"Chet!" he shouted. "There ain't none of them Long T's to be found nowhere! They're clean gone! Get busy! I'm goin' for Boulton, an' we'll foller you an' Gage through th' canyon an' down th' valley. Bud ain't had no chance to drive 'em out of th' country, an' we'll shore find 'em som'ers on his stampin' ground east of th' hills! Slim an' Reb's gone to ask th' Peabodys if they've seen or heard any cows bein' drove past th' other end of Striped Canyon. I told 'em to come right up here to you as soon's they got through. I'm off to tell Boulton!"

"Wait a minute!" cried Taggart, the saddle falling from his knees. "You tell yore uncle, an' *I'll* see Boulton. We can't go at this hit or miss! Me an' Boulton has got to work together an' foller a plan. What did I tell you about Bud? What I been preachin' all this time? Bud's been gettin' rich on us; but who reckoned he could get them Long T's past th' line house with our men in it? By G—d, Milt! Now you'll mebby know what that Matt Skinner was doin' on this ranch! Now you'll mebby understand his night shiftin', when honest folks was satisfied to be in bed! An' he's gone, clean gone! Damn me for a fool! I should 'a' turned him over!"

The foreman, slinging the partly mended saddle on his shoulder, bolted through the door and ran to the corral, shouting instructions on the way.

"Tell yore uncle, Milt!" he roared. "Gage, come with me till I can tell you what to do. You've got to find Black Dan an' send him back here."

Taggart yanked down the bars, roped and saddled his horse as Gage entered the enclosure. He hurled one more command at the puncher in the bunkhouse door.

"Tell Reb an' Slim to wait here till I get back," and he was gone without bothering to replace the bars, hoping the impounded horses would pour out and scatter over the range. Gage took care to excite them more before he shot out and spurred after his foreman.

Milt's hand slipped to his gun butt and he scowled after the racing pair on their way to Los Altos to carry their warning, and then he glanced at the horses streaking from the corral. He vaulted into his saddle and raced to the opening, getting there in time to drive back the last few animals and to put up the bars. From there he rode to the ranchhouse and took part in a busy and highspeed discussion with his uncle and sister before going in search of Black Dan, whom he knew would be ignored by Taggart and Gage.

In Los Altos Sheriff Boulton, rudely awakened by the precipitate Reb, opened his door on a crack wide enough to allow the barrel of a six-gun to slip through, and then demanded his caller's name and business. He learned both in a rush, asked some questions, of which not half were answered, and called after the running puncher, even in his curiosity running a few paces down the street, clad only in his night shirt and gun, in a vain effort to overtake the dust-raising horse.

Therefore he was entirely prepared to see, a few hours later, the foreman of the Hundred Eleven ride past his office, accompanied by Gage. The two riders kept on without pausing and dismounted in front of the bank; and as they went up the stairs to the second floor Boulton wandered to the foot of the stairs and collected friends around him for the purpose of discussion.

"Bud's gettin' farther off every day," said the sheriff, loudly. "I was fixin' to drop his trail when I caught sight of another Skinner down to Valverde. Somethin' tells me Bud'll work back to his desert hangout before long, an' so I've taken every man off th' South Trail an' sent 'em up between here an' Vasquez. Anybody heard anythin' new this mornin'?"

Above him a head drew back from a window and Taggart smiled at Cal Howard, who had had a hard night and had not gone home at all. Cal had been drinking heavily and was in a savage and revengeful mood. The three consulted again, decided that the sheriff should be told about the rustling so as not to arouse any suspicions afterward, and then Chet went out and down the stairs, pushing through the little crowd and stopping in front of the sheriff.

"Boulton," he interrupted, "we just found out that all them Long T's have been rustled, an' some Hundred 'Levens with 'em. I'm reportin' it. What you aim to do?"

"How long they been gone?" demanded Boulton. "Tracks fresh?"

"There ain't no tracks, an' there ain't no tellin' how long they've been gone."

"If you fellers can't watch yore animals better'n that, you can't expect me to leave this Bud Skinner chase, where there *are* tracks, an' go jack-rabbitin' around th' country lookin' for cows that are mebby a couple hundred miles away! Every man I can call on is on another job. When we get through with thet we'll look for yore cattle."

"Is that th' word yo're sendin' back to Randall Glenn?" demanded Taggart, wrathfully.

"What else *can* I send back?" snapped Boulton. "What're yore men doin'?"

"Lookin' for 'em!"

"After I get Bud I'll throw a posse 'tother side of th' hills an' see what's there," replied Boulton. "I can't do it to-day or to-morrow. As it is I've left th' hull country wide open south of them hills, from Valverde west. I've drawn every man from down there an' moved 'em up north on a gamble. You tell Glenn I'm doin' my best."

Taggart frowned, turned slowly, and went back upstairs, where Cal and Gage eagerly waited for him. In a few minutes the two punchers went down, mounted, and galloped down the street in the direction of the ranch, anxious to get to the stolen herd, warn the men with it, send two scouts to look over a passable drive route leading southward, and then hasten back to the ranch to collect the outfit for a long, wild-goose chase in another direction. When out of sight of town they swung aside and raced for Glenn's Canyon along the shortest way.

Call Howard waited a few minutes and then ap-

peared in the street, where his personal appearance aroused comment. He gossiped with several acquaintances and made his careless way to the saloon to steady his nerves before visiting the sheriff.

Down at Glenn's Canyon Slim, waiting for his friend Reb, caught sight of that person circling up from the southwest so as to leave innocent tracks approaching the canyon. They exchanged hails, met, and raced through the canyon, whirled into Striped Canyon and thundered up to the door of the Peabody house.

"Hello in there!" shouted Reb. "Hello th' house!"

Obadiah's wife came to the door, a rifle in her hand, and demanded to know what was wanted.

"Where's th' men folks?" snapped Reb.

"Don't make so much noise," retorted Mrs. Peabody. "Can't you let 'em sleep in peace?"

"What they doin', sleepin' this time o' day?" demanded Reb.

"Mindin' their own business. You mind yourn!"

"I'm aimin' to, an' I got some to mind!" retorted Reb. "We've lost a passel of cows, an' I'm askin' you if you know anythin' about 'em. That's th' business I'm mindin'!"

"Don't know nothin' about yore cows, an' don't want to. You can turn around an' git!"

"Ain't you seen or heard a drive past th' other end of this canyon?" asked Reb.

"I ain't; an' I wouldn't tell you if I had!"

"We're wastin' time, Reb," cut in Slim, anxiously. "There's only one way they could 'a' gone, an' that's out of Glenn's an' plumb down th' big valley. Every

minute we waste with this bunch of vermin only let's 'em get farther away. Come on!"

"We got to try everythin', ain't we?" retorted Reb. "What can us two do ag'in Bud an' his gang?"

"We can locate 'em an' one of us raise dust for Los Altos an' th' sheriff!"

"I'll vermin ye!" cried Obadiah's wife, raising the rifle. She screamed a curse as Slim tore it from her hand and wheeled to follow his racing companion into the canyon. As he entered the chasm he hurled the rifle among the bowlders, turned in his saddle and waved at the virago whose screamed maledictions rang in his ears.

Reaching the end of the canyon they pushed on for a few miles as if bound down the valley, then turned abruptly and climbed along the face of a deep ravine, crossed the top of the divide, and went down the other side. Heading in the direction of Los Altos they bore more and more to the south, followed along the top of a low ridge until across the Los Altos trail, and then turned for the ranchhouse. When they arrived they found Milt, Randall Glenn, Agnes, and Black Dan awaiting them.

"Everythin's all right so far," called Reb as he slowed. "Boulton will tell 'em just enough to worry 'em, an' make 'em carry a warnin' to their friends with th' cattle. He's sendin' a man he can trust, roundabout to Jim French, in case they try to run off th' herd."

After a short discussion Milt and Black Dan mounted and led Reb and Slim eastward toward the line house, there to ride on close against the base of the ridge and follow the directions given them by Matt.

CHAPTER XXIV

NOT ON THE SCHEDULE

CHET TAGGART and Gage rode at top speed through the two canyons and stopped before the composite dwelling as Mrs. Peabody, armed with another rifle, came to the door to see who they were. Her look of anger faded and she hurried to them, excitedly telling about the visit of Reb and Slim. Taggart questioned her closely and was relieved when he learned of the other callers' suspicions regarding the main valley.

"Good! Let 'em search it," he said. "It'll keep 'em out of mischief for awhile. Come on, Gage."

They raced along the pack-train trail, and when opposite the fifth canyon Gage rode into the little valley where the distillery was located while Taggart pushed on into the other. A guard stepped out, saw who it was, and stepped back into his niche; but Taggart rode up to him, gave him a few curt orders and went on. Reaching the log house in the ravine, he found his herders eating, and his news caused consternation among them. Two men bolted their food, mounted, and rode hurriedly southward toward the far end of the valley, to spy out if the coast was clear for a drive in case matters became desperate enough to make the

attempt necessary. The other four accompanied Taggart to round up the cattle, and as night settled down the herd was loosely bunched, ready to start on a long journey.

Taggart was undecided whether to remain in the valley and trust that it would be overlooked, or to take advantage of the unwatched country to the south and start the drive while there was time for it. In the valley his men could put up a much better defense than they could in the open country, but in neither case could they cope with the force which Boulton could command. A great deal depended on how Cal Howard played his part, and to help Cal along, Taggart ordered a few Long T cattle, which as yet had not been rebranded, to be driven somehow over the mountains and left to wander east of them, in the main outer valley and near Bud Skinner's old stamping ground. If they were found out there, it would indicate that they were stragglers from a stolen herd, driven through that section on its way to the desert-like country where Bud had held sway.

Swung first one way and then the other, and not implicitly trusting that the south was unguarded, despite Boulton's words to that effect, Taggart waited impatiently for the return of the scouts and for any news which Howard might send him. Cal was to remain in Los Altos, since he hardly could be connected with the stolen herd, and lay a false trail and keep his partner well informed of every move the sheriff made. Taggart had great faith in Howard's logic and cleverness, upon which he banked without question, and a faith which

Howard always had justified. He did not realize the inferno seething in his partner, the blind rage and mad desire for revenge for the humiliation he had suffered at the hands of the Hundred Eleven. He did not realize the extent of Howard's drinking, how it was swaying the lawyer, warping his judgment and feeding the fires in him.

Back in Los Altos Cal Howard drained the bottle and threw it on the bar. His legs were steady and his tongue had not thickened enough to make his speech ridiculous. He remembered clearly what he was to do and how he was to do it. His imagination was stimulated until it became more than usually vivid and active, and he turned over and over the part he was to play, with an addition of his own. He was not so keen now about stealing Hundred-Eleven cattle, since the bank, at his urging, had called the note for payment. It could not be met, and he would see that the judgment obtained on it would put him into possession of the ranch for a laughable sum. He was aiding Taggart to steal his own cattle, cattle that would be his as soon as the legal routine was gone through. Nevertheless, he had given his word, and no Howard ever went back on that.

He leaned over and held another talk with the bartender. A half-breed whom he had saved from the penalty for murder was called to the bar, given his instructions, and sent on his way to the sheriff's office. Other men hastened away, to mount and ride. A few minutes later Cal, beginning to stagger a little, went out and followed the half-breed. He was passing the

sheriff's office when he looked in through the window, hesitated a moment, and then hastened inside. Boulton always had been friendly to him and had shown regard for his ability and truthfulness.

The sheriff looked up, turning from the half-breed, who started to slip from the chair, but Cal grabbed him and slammed him back again, holding him with a rigid arm while he turned to the peace officer.

"Don't pay this *mozo* a cussed *peso*, Boulton," he said. "It took me near an hour to get his story when he came to me for advice. I can tell it to you in a few minutes. As an attorney I regard myself an arm of the Court, and in a matter like this it is my duty to speak. It's not a question between me and Randall Glenn, but between me and the law. Keep your eye on this *ladrón*, and listen to me.

"This man came to me to learn if there was any reward offered for the discovery of Glenn's cattle. He was riding northeast of Valverde about ten days ago to get some of that wheat whiskey that's been worrying you, when he saw a big herd of cattle on the drive. He hid at a point they would pass and waited to get a look at the brands. Bud Skinner and four of his men were driving it. It was made up of Long T's and some Hundred Elevens, and was heading straight for the edge of the desert. He said he didn't follow it because he was afraid of Bud, but he is certain he knows where it was taken. For a reward he'll lead a posse to the place. He says we can't track because there's been a strong wind blowing out there for more than a week, and it has covered the trail. What you think of it?"

"Just what I reckoned," answered Boulton. "If we find Bud we'll find th' herd close by. I'll lock this feller up as a suspicious character, hustle down to Valverde an' send a gang out from there to search th' desert country. Them cattle ain't in this part of the country. If they was we'd 'a' stumbled on 'em while we was lookin' for Bud all this time."

Boulton turned the half-breed over to a deputy with instructions to lock him up, went out, mounted his horse, and started for Valverde. He did not allow himself the luxury of a grin until he had put the town well behind him. He had other business in Valverde if French had not already left.

Cal went back to the saloon, had a few more drinks and a good laugh with the bartender, and then went to get his horse and put into operation his own, private plan. At the stable he gave a Mexican a message for Taggart and sent him off with it, rocking on his heels with drunken laughter at how surprised his partner would be by the next news he would receive, delivered in person by Cal Howard. Boulton was not in sight on the trail when Cal reached the hill south of town and swung off at angle, riding hard into the south. A score of miles rolled behind him before he joined a group of cut-throats waiting in a ravine for his coming. His impatient questions were sullenly answered, and he had to force himself to wait for the return of the scout. He was surrounded by the worst men to be found in the country, all of them owing him for their liberty and some of them for their lives. He had cheated the law of every last one of them.

At length the scout returned and made his excited report. The Hundred Eleven lay undefended, its punchers hotly seeking for signs of the missing cattle. The news affected the various members of the band in different ways, for some of them realized the desperate game they were to take part in. This was no mere stealing of cattle, no expedition of pilfering, but something which would turn the hand of every decent man against them with exultant savageness. Nevertheless, they obeyed their leader's command and rode forth with him, taking the precaution to mask their faces with kerchiefs, an example which he was not too drunk to follow. He let them take his coat and roll it in a slicker, and from another he accepted a slicker to wear in place of it. As they rode he pulled a bottle from a saddle pocket, but it was taken from him and thrown away, an action which nearly led to strife.

The afternoon was gone when the band swept up to the ranchhouse of the Hundred Eleven and rushed its two doors simultaneously. The Chinese cook paid for his loyalty by having a gun butt brought down on his head and was out of the fight almost before it started. The band swarmed into the house and found Randall Glenn leaping to a table drawer. His two shots brought down their men and then he was overwhelmed and knocked unconscious, while three of the raiders battered at a closed door leading into another room. A shot ripped through the panel, followed by two more, and the eager raiders, cursing and nursing their wounds, stepped to one side. Howard staggered toward it and fired a shot into the lock, and under the weight of him-

self and others the door crashed inward. The little room was filled with powder smoke, eddying in the breeze coming in through an open window, but it took only an instant to show that the bird had escaped. The gang piled out of the house and saw a pacer leap from the corral with Agnes on its bare back. Two men knelt swiftly and their rifles cracked. The pacer plunged to its knees almost on top of the wounded bunk-house cook and threw its rider hard.

In a few minutes six men rode furiously southward, the others glad of the chance to flee and to scatter, and on the horse ridden by a masked man in a yellow slicker was Agnes Glenn, tied to her captor. When far enough south to escape from being seen by any puncher riding in from the line house, the little band swung toward the hills, crossed the ridge south of the hump, and plunged into the wilds. It did not pay to humiliate a Howard.

CHAPTER XXV

MARKING TIME

BALDY had stopped to tighten the girth of his saddle, Matt riding on around the turn. They were passing the south end of the rustlers' valley and between them lay a shallow wash which dipped over the hill and became a gorge on each side. Matt became aware that he was alone and pulled up to wait. He listened, and thought he heard horses. Wheeling, he started back.

The cinch tightened, Baldy put his foot in a stirrup, and paused to listen. Horses were coming up from the gorge. He led his mount among the boulders, dropped the reins over its head, and slipped back again. Bobbing up the ravine as fast as they could urge their horses came a Mexican and an American, both habitués of Cal Howard's favourite saloon in Los Altos, and from the way they were forcing their mounts they were in desperate haste. Baldy crouched under a boulder, both guns drawn.

"Eet ees meestak to leeve thee canyon," argued the Mexican, vehemently. "On thee open we weel haf no chance weeth all thee cattle."

"'Tween th' devil an' th' deep sea," replied the

other. "He wants to know if th' way is clear. That's all *I* want to know. I'm gettin' scarce, *pronto.*"

"But eef we don't come back he weel not know," expostulated the Mexican.

"We gotta think of ourselves, Tony," growled the other. "We ain't got no herd to picket us here. If he starts 'em south he's done; if he don't, he's done. Only chance he's got is to leave 'em an' hit th' trail."

Baldy was inching forward, but just as he was about to step out he saw Matt on the other side of the wash shaking his head until he appeared likely to lose it. Baldy checked himself and raised inquiring eyebrows, and at the contortions on the face of his friend he scowled and drew back behind his shelter. Here was a good opportunity being willfully thrown away.

Slowed by a steep rise in the rock, the riders used all their skill in forcing their mounts up it. At the top they rested their horses and looked back.

"I no lak to leeve heem," protested the Mexican.

"All right; don't," replied the other. "I ain't worryin' about yore hide a-tall. *I'm* leavin', an' I'm leavin' *now.* I'll send word to yore wife first chance I get, an' tell her where to go to cut you down!" His jeering laugh brought a scowl to the Mexican's face.

"I go weeth you, Char-rles," said Tony in sudden decision. "Come, *pronto!*"

Baldy put up his guns, jammed his hands on his hips, and stared in the direction the two deserters had gone, reluctant, disgusted. After a moment he looked across the wash at Matt, who leaned carelessly against a rock and laughed at him. Then he strode heavily after his horse.

In the saddle again, Matt smiled as his companion sullenly joined him.

"That's two we don't have to think about, Baldy. What would we 'a' done with 'em?"

"They might 'a' made a play," growled Baldy.

"Not with *you* holdin' two guns on 'em," rejoined Matt. "We're well rid of 'em. Come on; our interest is with th' *big* fellers."

They went on at a fair pace and finally cast around for a suitable place for the horses and supplies, found it, and soon were lying at the edge of the cliff, looking down on the stolen cattle, the herders, and the log house. Baldy prepared to pass the rest of the day in luxurious idleness, barring the sun on his back and neck and the roughness and hardness of the rock under him.

"There's Chet an' Gage!" exclaimed Matt. "They're roundin' up."

"Yeah; an' there's two greasers down there that can fight like hell," said Baldy, growing a little more cheerful. "How long we goin' to loaf up here before we drop down an' mix a batch of trouble?"

"Till we can get down without bein' seen," answered Matt. "Gosh! Chet an' Gage here already! I'm tellin' you Reb's a good man."

"None better in a mix-up," admitted Baldy. "There wasn't no sense lettin' them two slip out on us. If I'd sheathed my guns an' got careless they'd pulled. That Tony would pull a cougar's whiskers."

"An' then what?"

"They wouldn't 'a' got away!"

"An' th' whole valley would 'a' heard th' shots."

Baldy cogitated. He looked reproachfully at his friend, trying to frame an answer that would avoid the truth of Matt's remark and present his own side of the argument with brilliant and overwhelming force. Several times he opened his mouth, but shut it again. Then he spat forcibly and scowled into the valley.

"Say it," invited Matt, not looking at him.

Baldy glanced around, spat again, and began to count the drifting cattle. He had reached two hundred and eighty-three when a horseman cantered out of the canyon and rode toward Taggart.

"Obadiah," muttered Matt. "There's chins to wipe, Baldy."

"Two-hundred-eighty-four—gettin' more like Grant County every minute," said Baldy. "Matt, some day soon me an' you'll go down to Grant County an' stir it up; she stirs easy. Eight-hundred-eighty-four—four-hundred-eighty-eight—— Aw, hell! Now I gotta begin all *over* ag'in!"

"Wonder where Jim French is?" queried Matt.

"Ain't started yet. Ain't had time. Lucky if he reaches these hills before mornin', an' he'll shore as hell get lost an' wander around a day or two before he goes back, cussin' you for a practical joker." Baldy rearranged the kerchief on the back of his neck and tried to make the sombrero keep off more sun. "We'll have this little party all to ourselves; just me an' you, Reb an' Slim, Black Dan an' Milt, if Milt don't get lost. Hey, see them two greasers passin' each other? Them's th' two; don't forget 'em after th' handkerchief drops. Guns or knives; it's all th' same to them."

"Thought you didn't figger greasers very high?"

"There's Greasers an' greasers; *them's* Greasers." He squinted. "I see Dirty Shirt Wilkins; he's been so full of likker th' last fifty-eight years that he'll jump when a cricket chirps. Give him a safe ambush, a good rest for his rifle, a close-up shot, an' there ain't *no* fightin' human he won't tackle if his nerve holds out. Over on his right is Smallpox—Tony made him climb a organ cactus two years ago, an' he ain't all healed up yet; th' dirt keeps th' sores runnin'. Hey! Here comes Gran'pa Peabody with two rifles an' a shotgun! Betcha he lived in Grant County!"

"He won't die there," replied Matt.

"We oughta go over on th' other side, an' get close to th' house," suggested Baldy.

"No time to go around, an' we'll miss th' boys if we do. Won't take long to cross th' valley; hope there's clouds over th' moon."

"There will be," said Baldy. "*Two-hundred-eighty-four!* That was it! Shucks; they've shifted too much since then. *You* count 'em, Matt."

The afternoon dragged, but just before dusk a low whistle behind them made them squirm like eels on a hot stone. Reb's grinning face peered over a ridge of rock. Slim's arose beside it, and then both looked back and started to jerk and to jiggle as Black Dan came into view farther along the ridge.

"Quit yore kickin', you damn fools!" said a well-known voice.

"Find a place of your own—I ain't no ladder!" retorted Reb, jiggling.

Heartfelt curses wafted over the ridge and then Milt's earnest countenance came into sight, a faint red line across his cheek telling of the caress of Reb's careless spur.

"What you reckon I am?" demanded Milt. "A hoss?"

"Plain jackass," rejoined Reb. "See anythin', Matt? Hello, Wishbone!"

"Go to hell!" said Baldy, again shifting the sombrero, from force of habit. "Got any drinkin' water?"

"Go to hell!" said Reb.

Milt wriggled over the ledge, slid down it, and crawled to the edge of the cliff. He looked into the valley and sucked in his breath.

"Fellers!" he called, "come here!"

His companions joined him and swore earnestly. Taggart and Gage were holding a conversation, the foreman's arm twice extending toward the south.

"An' we been livin' with them two skunks all this time!" marvelled Black Dan. "Th' dirty thieves!"

"Chet *did* make a mistake when he hired Matt," chuckled Slim.

Milt was growling, and he turned to Matt.

"What you figgerin' to do?" he asked.

"Wait till dark an' then start a ruckus. What's botherin' me is how we're goin' to connect Howard to this gang. I was hopin' he'd scare an' join 'em."

Baldy glared at Dirty Shirt and Smallpox, and licked his lips.

"I see two coyotes that'll connect Howard if we connect a hot iron to their skins," he said. "They'll tell

all they know at th' sight of a hot iron. Won't have to put a scar on 'em."

Milt shook his head. "Don't make so much difference as long as we get th' herd an' bust up th' gang. What's worryin' Uncle Rand is that cussed note."

"Can't he borrow enough to pay it?" asked Matt.

"Tried it, an' failed."

"Ain't he got no relatives that'll help him out?"

Milt's coat of tan seemed to lighten a shade, and furious anger gripped him.

"Th' only relative he's got that could help him wouldn't help Christ!"

"Make it a business proposition," suggested Matt, thoughtfully. "Pay big interest."

"Uncle Rand will lose all he's got before he'll touch a cent of *that* money," rasped Milt. "Wish it was dark."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE ATTACK

HALF a mile south of a point that would have been intersected by a line drawn due east from the log house was a geological study. From the floor of the valley, sloping steeply up through the cliff, ran a stratum of igneous rock, time- and weather-resisting, which formed a cap layer to the softer rock beneath. Above this amorphic stratum were sandstones and shales eroded until they had receded, here a little, there a great deal. The igneous layer formed a shelf that slanted from the north to the south, and pitched down at an angle of forty-five degrees. Where this ledge was narrow the action of countless rains had scoured the wind-borne earth from it and refused germinating ground to all vegetals; these narrow places were smooth, clean rock. At others, where the shales predominated, the ledge had been uncovered well back and there was a series of brush-clothed ravines, their sides sparsely studded with dwarfed timber.

In one of the latter there were slow movements in the crazy-quilt pattern of moonlight under the stunted trees. A man stepped toward the ledge, dropped to hands and knees, crawled a few yards, and then flat-

tened against the ground to wriggle over an exposed rise. As he squirmed downward others followed.

Below them was a fairyland. The waning moon, still bright enough to aid sight, illuminated the long, narrow valley, softened the harsh gashes of sand, transmuted the bare ridges of rock into streaks as black and soft and deep as charcoal. The resting herd could be made out, hundreds of lumps scattered on the dark gray earth. Out of the blackness under the west cliff there sprang a gleam of dull yellow light, a weak, apologetic, furtive gleam.

"Thanks for th' light," grunted the first of the skulking figures as he reached the bottom and stopped for his fellows. "Thanks ag'in for roundin' up th' cows. There won't be a line of 'em jumpin' up an' runnin' from us to tell that something's wrong."

"Or jumpin' up an' runnin' *at* us," growled Milt. "Them Long T animals ain't got no respect for a man afoot." He glanced over his shoulder. "Remindin' you of Grant County, Baldy?"

"I got hopes," grunted the two-gun man. "Go on, Matt; we're all here."

Had any of the night herders been gifted with telescopic vision he might have seen a straggling line of men flitting, scurrying, and creeping across the valley. He might have seen them reach the shadows of the farther cliff and fade into them, each tingling with the spirit of adventure, tight-lipped, exultant, eager, and coldly vengeful. The leader was shrewd, long-headed, prophetic, with a trained gun hand; the second, untried in battle, but steaming with high-pressure anger and

valour; the third, ape-like, cold with a glittering ferocity, swinging his long arms, his huge hands brushing his bowed-out knees, a veritable epic of destruction unsoftened by any saving mercy; the fourth, debonair, his sombrero setting rakishly on his head, the rifle in his hand swinging back and forth in time to his steps; the fifth, once waited for in ambush, slim, red-haired, freckled, unconsciously drawing his fingers along the cones of lead projecting from the loops of a well-filled belt; and the sixth, mechanically chewing tobacco, cursing the high-heeled, awkward boots that made him stumble. Here and there sounded a grunt, the sigh of an indrawn breath, a muttered malediction at some obstruction or some scarifying cactus reaching out of the shadow to exact its toll.

Fleecy clouds passed before the moon, wind-driven wisps of snowy gossamer, tenuous, swiftly changing, casting faint areas of dimmed light across the earth below. Studding the sky were myriads of stars robbed of their brilliancy by the nearer and brighter moon. They grew or faded as the clouds passed and wave after wave of thin shadows swept across the cliffs and the plain.

A man climbed with infinite caution to the ledge behind the log house which lay eighty feet below it. He pressed against the rock like a timid lizard under the cautioning influence of instinctive fear. Inch by inch, foot by foot he dragged himself, scorning no cover however slight. At the base of this jutting point two more men crept along the litter of rocks and cliff-side débris, worming silently and persistently toward the upper end of the ravine, hoping to cross it and hasten to their as-

signed duty farther afield. Baldy already was creeping along the north side of the ravine, eager to reach a place which commanded the cabin door, and Slim was not far from him. Matt had gone on along the bank toward a clump of big trees farther east.

A dog barked, clamorously, savagely, and then was choked into a rumbling, spasmodic growl and grew silent. There was a flurry of quick movements, shadowy flittings, a door slammed, and strange rustlings whispered through the brush. Matt ran swiftly toward the tree clump, cursing the dog with panting breath. Baldy kept on, crawling like a wary spider toward his chosen vantage point. Milt wriggled up the rough, scored slope leading to the ledge where bowlders lay scattered in profusion. Reb and Dan were running past the blind end of the ravine to cross it and hurry to the inner end of the entrance canyon, there to hold the narrow chasm against the guard at the outer end, to interpose their weapons and wills between the besieged cabin and any reinforcement.

Not far from the cabin there came a quick stir in the brush and a finger of flame stabbed upward, a signal to the canyon guard. The bullet clipped the rock near Milt's head, flying particles of lead and stone cutting his face and turning him into a contortion of movement clawing toward a better cover. Dan fired at the flash, dropped his man, and then sagged against a rock, his left arm limp and throbbing along his side as a spurt of fire leaped from the cabin door. A third tore Reb's hat from his head and filled his hair with blood. He and his companion shrank into better cover, Dan cursing in

agony and rage, Reb wordless in rage and agony. Dan dropped the rifle and drew his six-gun, flaming a single shot at the cabin. Reb, wiping blood from his smarting eyes, waited for a clean shot. High above, youth and inexperience blazed lurid jets against the dark background, his hot lead harmlessly absorbed by heavy logs and yielding roof-clay.

A two-gun sharpshooter lay like a waiting cat and made no sound, no movement, his thumbed hammers ready to fall on fulminate and powder. Ten feet from him Slim watched the same door. At the small grove Matt stopped and looked around. The light in the cabin, seen through the interposing brush, winked out; the moonlit plain was below and beyond him, and he could see the resting herd and the three riders circling in indecision. Above him spread a dense mass of leaves, a shining cone from above; a dark and shadowy mystery from below. One tree caught his attention. It rose straight up from the southern edge of the clump and towered above the others. More than a dozen feet from the ground a great limb reached out over the ravine, inclining downward at its outer end. It pushed out past the barrier of the other trees and would give a plain view of the cabin window and of the entire ravine. Directly over the narrow trail it branched, making a crotch useful to any sharpshooter who might gain it.

With his kerchief Matt tied the rifle to his belt and climbed slowly, laboriously The girth of the trunk was appreciably smaller half a dozen feet from the ground, and once past this point his progress became more rapid. Gaining the great limb he straddled it.

Once out on the crotch he could not shift his position after each shot, but must remain in one place. If he were hit he might be knocked off, to be riddled when he struck the earth below. The fall, itself, might put him out of the fight. He set his jaw and worked out, careful not to allow his movements to become rhythmical and set the limb rising and falling with increasing arc, and thereby challenge some watchful eye. To avoid this he abandoned the straddling, hitching method of progress and lay down, holding the rifle in one hand and drawing himself along by the other. The limb ceased its jerky swing and bent so slowly that it amounted practically to no motion. Reaching the crotch, he pushed himself into a cross-legged position and found he could use both hands for the rifle. Now and then searching bullets clipped and sung below him, cutting through the earth-bound brush, to spang from rock or to chuck into heavy growing wood. He shifted until he faced the cabin window, his rifle slowly going to his shoulder, to be lowered again.

The cabin window was a window no more. A heavy shutter closed it, its one loophole flashing with lurid rage. Intermittently from within sounded the deep voice of the dog, a rumbling accompaniment to the sharper, flatter notes. In that cabin desperate men monotonously cursed their enemies, each other, and themselves. Outside Milt wasted ammunition until Reb's indignant, pain-racked shout gave him sense. Reb, with burning scalp and trickling blood slowly drying into a tight, stiff mask on brow and face, held a silent rifle watchfully. Dan, moaning in curious little

bursts, lay throbbing against his rock, the dull Colt poised to strike. Slim lay like a dead man, his face tense. Baldy was as rigidly still as the rock he lay behind, staring at the shadowy door, waiting.

The distant roll of the fleeing herders' horses had died out toward the canyon, not a gun now spoke, not a rustle was heard save that of the wind in the topmost leaves. The hypocritical ravine lay in moonlight and shadow, its soft, fragrant beauty alluring like the tempting cup of the pitcher-plant. Then there came the faint sounds of horses, growing steadily louder. Baldy pushed back into heavier cover, arose, and ran to meet that growing sound, both guns swinging jerkily from his jerkily swinging hands, too wise to reveal himself by a shot at the now noisy loophole. He was no baying hound; he copied the silent mountain cat, leaving his snarls to follow his spring.

Matt saw the shadowy flitting of the two-gun man through the brush below. He heard the clatter of racing hoofs rising louder and louder; the futile protests of the youthful Milt, the cracking pleas for help from the loopholed shutter, the excited baying of the dog.

The running horses shot into sight, curving off on the pasture to give their riders a long-range view of the noisy cabin. On the ledge behind the building a red flash burst at intervals, but now the deceptive ravine was still as death. The running horses spread, stopped, whirled, parted, and bunched again as their riders consulted, their attention on that green-banked, alluring death trap. This, they decided, was no game for cavalry, but rather one of crawl and shoot, wriggle and

stab. They were free to roam the cover, bellies to the ground, while their friends held the citadel. There is latent power in a defended fort but dynamic energy in a foot-free force. One shoots and holds, the other strikes and fades, to strike again.

These men were no cowards, thinking only of their own skins, but the best half-dozen from the outer camp, each man a volunteer for this special service. It was not fear alone that held them on that lighted plain, but the desire to make their limited number count to the best advantage, and to gain this end they planned and argued hurriedly.

Matt sat tailor-fashion on the fork, an elbow on a knee, the Sharps resting on a solid, firm palm. He peered from his leafy cover and was blessed by witnessing an inspiring tableau staged by the one man who was held in such awe by the consulting Mexicans that he alone could have gone through with it. This awe was based on true knowledge, and braced by a superstition of a power unbelievable by any one who did not know these men. Matt looked, warmed, thrilled, and choked back, with conscious effort, the proud and exultant shout that strained for utterance.

Baldy, forsaking the last bit of cover, had reverted to the tactics upon which his reputation was built, a human spider crawling without emotion upon his prey. The grotesque, squat figure on twinkling legs rolled down the scored and gravelly slope, as yet unseen by the hesitant group, weaving swiftly as it crossed the open. There came a Spanish exclamation, quick prayers in the form of oaths, and a panicky splitting of the group as it

fired nervously from jerking and cavorting horses. Superstitious terror ruined their aim, numbed their faculties, kept them milling aimlessly when they should have fled or steadied. Baldy rolled on, every step gained a gain in the certainty of his withheld fire. The whining lead whined uselessly, neither swerving him more nor checking him. The saints were invoked in vain, for the whining lead missed atrociously. The riders found their panic shared by the trembling horses, both hypnotized by that misshapen son of hell waddling across the plain, the bowed legs springing sidewise, the short torso swaying like some devil-dance, the ape-like arms swinging gently to and fro, the great stubby hands limp and weaponless.

A horse, goaded by a desperate spur, arose on quivering hind legs, swayed too far and tottered backward, its fear-numbed rider pinned beneath it by a shattered leg. The others came to sudden life, springing from this human spider who now was so close. The spider stopped, his long arms jerked, dull glints of moonlight sprang from his hips, and then there streamed jets of flame, stabbing through the rolling powder smoke that writhed and swirled and spread out to hug the hidden ground.

A horse screamed, a sound to chill the blood and set the nerves on edge. A man shrilled a falsetto curse that quavered lingeringly before it died, with him. Horses thundered in several directions, like water spattered by a falling stone. Here a rider, dropping rifle, swung down, Indian fashion, to the far side of his racing horse and fled in a hysteria of fear; there another,

his clutching hand to a spurting wound, reeled as he fled and dully hoped he could keep to the saddle. Another, stung by a gust of blind rage, hurled his horse back on its haunches to whirl and let him raise a steady rifle; he slobbered, swayed a moment, and then followed the plunging weapon to the sweet, deep grass. The last, desperate with fear for this devil from hell, feared no other man. He raced for the besieged cabin and the deadly valley, raging with hatred and the desire to kill. Behind him ran Baldy, reloading a Colt. The Mexican, fleeing from one man in the open to charge an unknown number of others hidden in cover, pulled up almost under Matt's limb and glanced back. His horse, throwing up its head, took the bullet which Reb had intended for its rider. The animal spread its legs convulsively and stiffened for an instant. That instant was long enough for the rider to swing a leg over the saddle, but as it passed over the cantle, a heavy Sharps rifle swung downward in a short swift arc from the limb above. The heavy stock struck forehead, nose, and chin as the quivering horse dropped like a stone. Baldy, ducking to avoid the straighter fire from the suddenly active loophole, grunted at this miracle and leaped sidewise into cover, anxious to get back to his chosen place before the cabin door.

Back at the entrance canyon a fleeing horseman spread his panic and raced on, desperately eager to leave the accursed valley far behind. The restless canyon guard, now without the steadying influence of the braver half-dozen, not knowing how many enemies had invaded the valley behind them, or how many more

might be riding against them from the other direction, lost what little morale it had and swiftly disintegrated, every man for himself, and left the chasm undefended. Some of them, fleeing toward Los Altos, to be found in their accustomed haunts by daybreak, pulled from the trail and hid in cover until a solitary horseman, riding in the other direction, had passed them. They wanted no words with Long Jack, who was quick with his gun and likely would find no excuses for deserters.

Long Jack pushed on carelessly at a lope through the two canyons, past the silent Peabody house tenanted now by sleeping women. The news he had for Chet Taggart was urgent, and he lost no time after he swung on the pack-train trail. Reaching the turn, where the trail led eastward, he pulled up quickly to listen. Horsemen were coming down from the ridge, a little below the hump, and he pulled his gun while he waited to see who they were. A careless voice reassured him, and he pushed out on the trail again to wait for them.

"Cal, an' drunk ag'in," he muttered in strong disgust. "Ridin' over th' country like a damn fool, comin' in here th' wrong way! An' me tryin' to find him in town! Fine time to get drunk! There's goin' to be a showdown, an' quick. Either he keeps sober, plays th' cards we give him, or I pull my stake.'

"Ol' King Cole was a merry ol' soul, a merry ol' soul was he! Who'sat?" demanded Cal, staring at the stiffly erect horseman on the trail below. "Who'sat, Pedro?"

"Señor Long Jack," answered Pedro, holding the drunken lawyer more firmly in the saddle as the horses

went down the short steep slope. Another rider watched the prisoner, who now was bound to a horse of her own, caught not far from the other side of the ridge.

"Oh, Long Jack. Hello, Long Jack! Glad t-see you. Damn glad t-see you. Meet m'sweetheart. Sweetheart, meet Long Jack. Pleased t-meet you, you oughta say, Agnes. Long Jack's a goo' friend of——"

"What'n hell you doin'?" snapped Long Jack, doubting his eyes and ears. He spurred to the side of the drunken lawyer, grabbed him by the shoulder, and shook him until he slobbered. "Ain't you got no sense? I *knowed* you'd do somethin' to raise hell! Damn you for a fool!"

"Take your han' off'n me, sir!" exclaimed Cal, straightening up in drunken dignity. "Don't put your han's on me again! Won't have no pawin' an' shakin'. Won't have none a-tall! Keep your han's t'yourself, sir! M-meet Miss Ag-gnes G-Glenn."

Long Jack quivered, his hand gripping the butt of his gun until the knuckles stood out whiter than the rest of the hand. He was thinking at top speed. It would not do to send the woman back home, for now she had learned too much. They would have to keep her a prisoner, with the whole country tearing up the range and hills to find her. The only thing he could do was to get her to Taggart and try to figure some way out with the foreman's aid.

"*Pronto!*" he snapped, waving the group along the trail. "Hit it up! For a peso I'd kill you, you drunken

sot!" He bared his teeth to the unsteady lawyer. "Git in there, an' *travel!* Everybody, hit it up, *hard!*"

They clattered through the unwatched canyon, Long Jack wondering why there was no guard. In his rage he did not give it the thought it merited. Aflame with rage, his one thought was to get to Chet Taggart. To do this quickly he chose the straightest, if roughest, trail and did not cross the pasture land, where he might have seen things that would have broken through his rage and carried a warning. One thing he did do, instinctively, hardly realizing it: he slashed the binding rope from the daughter of his one-time employer and stuck behind her to see that she made no attempt to turn and make a race of it.

Suddenly he called to the half-dozen riders making up Cal's escort.

"Ride back an' watch that canyon," he ordered. "Somebody's gettin' damn careless in their haste about roundin' up. After th' play *this* damn fool's made, we can't take no chances. Stay there till yo're relieved, if it's a month! *Pronto!*"

CHAPTER XXVII

TO THE BITTER END

SILENCE lay over the ravine, cabin, and cliff as the shadow of the latter crept farther out into the valley. Ammunition was too precious to be used recklessly, and both sides watched for plainer targets, which neither side offered. Slim, tiring of the fruitless vigil, became restless after Baldy had returned to watch the cabin door. He whispered to the two-gun man and then pushed backward until it was safe to proceed on hands and knees. He passed close to Reb and Dan, exchanged news with them, and turned abruptly to the north, at this late hour to carry out the original plan, and to hold the inner end of the canyon by himself against the canyon guards. Reb arose to follow him, but had to give it up. He rested a moment and then retraced his steps, passed his former position, and crawled up the other bank of the ravine, his throbbing head filled with a plan he scarcely could wait to put into execution. Matt had not spoken to him about the bowlders on the ledge above the cabin, but Reb had discovered their value. He crept up the steep slope, softly calling to the man above, and at Milt's guarded reply he went rapidly on and wriggled over the edge.

Dan watched the west window and the door; Baldy

watched the door alone, promising himself that when daylight came he would search the chinking between the logs with eager lead and fill the cabin with a deadly stream; Slim was making good progress toward the canyon, keeping to the base of the towering cliff where he could not be discovered by hostile eyes; Reb and Milt were searching the scantily timbered slope above the ledge for a pry to set the boulders rolling; Matt sat, Turk fashion, on his perch, watching the loopholed east window and impatient for the coming of dawn. He was trying to check up the defenders in the cabin, and believed that it held Taggart, Gage, Obadiah, and his father. It was possible that Obadiah's two sons were in there with him, and Long Jack, since he neither had been seen nor heard from, might also be among the defenders. The odds were against the Hundred Eleven, but so long as the rustlers could be held in their fort and not allowed to sally out and let their numbers count, the fight was an even break. He had an ace to play when the time came that would turn the fight against the rustlers and force them to emerge in daylight, one by one, and surrender.

He cocked his head and listened. The sounds of horses came to him and filled him with a turmoil of conjecture. Were the newcomers a posse from Valverde, or were they more rustlers? It was scarcely possible that they could be Jim French and his men, for enough time had not elapsed for French to have been told, to have gathered a force, and made the ride through a country strange to him. This oncoming squad must be friendly to the besieged, and if allowed to pass it

might easily turn the scale. He peered through his leafy cover, and his eyes opened wide in surprise. There were three riders turning into the ravine: two men and a woman. Obadiah's wife and sons? They rode carelessly, as if they had no knowledge of the waiting danger.

Their voices made him tighten his grip on the limb. One was Cal Howard, disgracefully drunk; the second, a tall, lean stranger; the third, by all the devils of hell, was Agnes Glenn! He went cold, and then hot and hotter. Cal, riding ahead, weaved in the saddle and made exaggerated gestures with his arms; Agnes was riding astride, her head bowed; the long, lean man followed her closely and puffed furiously on his pipe between his edged comments about Cal and the situation he had placed them in. The bend in the ravine hid them from the cabin and they received no warning of their danger.

"Sit tight, says I to Chet," growled Long Jack. "I told him it would blow over; but I never figgered a damn fool like you was goin' to bust loose with no play like *this*. What happened to yore brains, Howard? Ain't you got no —— sense a-tall?"

"Min' your own business!" retorted Howard, unsteadily. "Man's gotta right t-think of his sweetheart, ain't he?"

"Wait till you hear what Chet thinks about it!" snapped the other. He spurred forward as Howard's hand fumbled at a gun butt, and grabbed the lawyer's wrist. "One more play like that an' you won't have to care what happens in this valley!"

The two horses slowed and stopped, squarely beneath a great tree limb, and Agnes pulled to one side, against the nearer bank.

"Be my cattle, anyhow," said Howard, struggling to tear his wrist loose. "Don't care what happens now. Lemme go, damn you! Take your paws offn me!"

A warning shot came from the loophole, an answer came from the ledge just as a hundred and eighty pounds of enraged cow-puncher dropped ten feet on Long Jack's back, one lean and sinewy arm smashing Cal Howard from the saddle. The unsuspecting horse went to its knees and spilled the two men to the ground, and Agnes grabbed the rifle from Long Jack's saddle scabbard as the animal went down. She drove her mount up the steep bank as one of the men, leaping to his feet, hurled himself on the rising and groping lawyer. Long Jack's horse scrambled to all-fours, whirled, and dashed toward the restless herd, something long and lean dragging from a stirrup.

Howard's frightened horse whirled and kicked, its hoofs each finding a mark. The struggling men were torn apart and hurled backward, Cal spinning like a top; the other, inertly falling. Sodden with liquor, the lawyer's brain was not functioning properly; its impressions were vague, blurred, confused. He saw Long Jack's horse tearing toward the herd, terrorized by the Thing which bumped against its legs, but he did not connect the Thing with Long Jack. His own animal was galloping in pursuit, and a third horse was clambering up the steep bank, its hoofs gashing the yielding

clay as it strove frantically for better footing. The comparative darkness under the tree effaced necessary details, and he thought it was ridden by Long Jack. He blinked, opened his mouth, blinked again, and then pounced on the figure stirring near his feet. His eager hands turned the man over, his peering eyes searched the dust-covered face, and he shrieked with laughter. The man who had humbled him lay under his hands, defenseless, at his mercy. He felt for his gun and found it gone, lost in the turmoil of the last few seconds, and he reached for his enemy's weapon. As his hand closed on the butt a rifle cracked from the gloom of the clump, a streak of fire trailed swiftly into oblivion, and Cal Howard, an exultant curse on his lips, pitched across the man beneath him.

Fire spurted from the loophole, gambling with the dark for a lucky hit. Puffs of dust sprang from the earth near the stirring puncher, a soft *thop* came from the body he rolled aside, and then from the darkness of the clump a flaming Winchester drove its lead into the shutter and kept the loophole harmless. The cabin door opened on a crack and screaming bullets riddled the tree trunks and spanged from the scattered rocks. From the top of the north bank a Colt jutted winking fire, and a choked moan within the cabin answered it, the door slamming shut to the sound of a dropping bar. From the loophole there emerged a long, slender rod of steel, but a glancing bullet from the trees tore through the cheek and neck of the man who held it. The door opened again on a desperate hazard, and slammed shut as Baldy raked the cabin.

Flat reports sounded in the direction of the entrance canyon, where Slim gambled with the new canyon guard that no man might gain the valley and live. It was a narrow way, that entrance, with no chance for flank attack against the deadly marksman who commanded the level canyon floor. Behind him, in the valley, a stampeded herd thundered before a horse which tried to flee from an inert and ghastly Thing dragging from a stirrup and striking against the whirring legs.

Matt crawled up the bank toward a frightened but determined woman who called to him while she shot methodically at the threatening window shutter. A bullet ripped off half the heel of his boot, another drove a handful of dust into his face; but the marksman, good as he was, would have been better in a better light and undisturbed by the bullets that made the shutter dance.

Agnes smiled bravely, handed the empty rifle to her companion, and clung to a tree to keep from spoiling it all. Her recent experience would have been enough to undermine her nerve without the shooting of Cal Howard. Matt slipped an arm under her shoulders, stooped and placed the other under her knees, picked her up, and felt her go limp. He carried her across a high spot on the bank and put her down behind it, safe from the searching bullets, chafing her hands and slapping her cheeks with swift and stinging pats. She sighed, turned a little, and saw him bending over her. Her eyes lost their vacant look and she smiled.

"All right now?" he asked, straightening up on his knees.

"Yes, Matt," she whispered. "Go finish it, to the bitter end!"

He nodded, placed his sombrero under her head, and went off to retrieve his rifle from where he had dropped it from the limb. He wriggled down the bank and his hand closed on the muzzle as a bullet from the loophole spanged from the heavy stock. In another moment a 550 grain slug, driven by 120 grains of the best rifle powder, smashed into the riddled shutter, and through it. Another struck a knot, drove it in, and split the shutter from top to bottom. A third, finding the loophole, glanced from its edge diagonally across the cabin and smashed Gage's shoulder like a blow from a sledge. And then a soft but heavy sound made him pause. There came another, followed by the splintering crash of breaking timbers and a dust cloud rising from the sagging roof of the cabin. A dark mass dropped down the face of the cliff with accelerating speed and sent a billow of dust swirling high above the falling roof. Logs swung out from the bulging wall, others shot into the ravine, and then the whole north side of the cabin bulged again, and fell under the slipping roof, a mass of wood and clay.

A figure leaped from the gaping window, to jerk spasmodically in air as Baldy's gun roared; another, springing from the pile of débris, whirled and spun, falling the full length of the sloping bank to lay quietly at the bottom. A fourth bowlder from the ledge struck the still standing south wall and drove it buckling out-

ward; a fifth hit the east end and turned it into a pile of cracking timbers.

Chet Taggart crawled from the mass of wreckage, shouting his curses, and ran down the slope, daring the two-gun man to an even break. Baldy sprang to his feet and ran to meet him, dropping Obadiah Peabody with a snap shot just as Obadiah raised a rifle. The two enemies cut down the intervening distance, Taggart firing hurriedly, hoping for a lucky shot. He threw away the empty gun and drew a second, which he had worn for the last twenty-four hours. The grotesque ape, leaping rocks and smashing through the brush, made a poor target, and the foreman stopped to take deliberate aim for his last two shots. The first tugged at Baldy's sombrero and passed harmlessly through, singing over the bank, and then the two-gun man stopped, and jerked his arm forward and up. Taggart, his last shot going skyward, buckled in the middle and dropped, his rustling over for all time.

From the distant canyon faint shots still sounded and Baldy, sensing that Slim might have more on his hands than he could handle, turned and ran along the ridge. He was sprinting through the tree clump when he caught sight of a grazing horse. In a moment he was on its back and racing down the ravine to the aid of the busy and desperate Slim.

Slim was lacking in gratitude and turned a bloody face to the two-gun man creeping to his side.

"Where th' hell *you* been all this time?" demanded Slim, clearing an eye of blood to get a better look. "What you been *doin'?*"

Baldy whipped a Colt into an opening between two rocks and grinned at the curse it evoked from the canyon.

"Pickin' juniper berries, you damn fool!" he answered, and fired again. "Th' rest of th' boys was shootin' craps on th' cabin roof, all except Matt. He was readin' th' Bible!" He glared at his unsightly companion. "What th' hell you think we was doin', you idjut?"

"Somethin' like that," growled Slim, and Baldy's two guns filled the canyon with singing lead. As he reloaded he yelled an insult to the canyon guards, and soon after the sound of his voice had been heard there came the noise of clattering hoofs, swiftly growing softer.

Slim turned a grinning face to his companion.

"Reckon they've done went," he guessed.

"They're lucky, then," growled Baldy. "All their friends are waitin' for a shovel. Better stay here a little longer, Slim; I ain't trustin' nothin' to-night."

"All right; but you mighta got here sooner."

Baldy glared at him.

"Huh! What you kickin' about? I chased 'em all away for you, didn't I?"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE END OF THE GAME

MATT SKINNER, sitting on the bench before the bunkhouse, packed his pipe carefully, struck a match on a thumb nail and sheltered the springing flame. He was puffing contentedly when he saw Slim Condon push up over a rise west of the corral and wave his hand. Since Slim had turned back a concerted rush at the rustlers' canyon and saved his companions from being flanked, he had been hard to live with. For Baldy's support he had only a jeer; Baldy had arrived too late to take part in that repulse. He had come up after the wave had receded. Slim, to use Baldy's elegant expression was all swelled up like a poisoned pup and put on more airs than a dog eating carrion. Hence the waving hand. His signal received no reply and he tried again, this time using his sombrero in case the new foreman had become near-sighted, cross-eyed, or totally blind. Matt puffed contentedly, his expression not changing

"Didn't you see me wave?" asked Slim, somewhat truculently, dropping from the saddle and groping in his pockets for the mail.

Black Dan stuck his lathered face out of the door and menaced the mail carrier with a soapy brush.

Despite the left arm in a sling he stubbornly insisted on shaving himself, this being by far the lesser of two evils.

"Listen, Slim," he said, enunciating with care. "If we bothered replyin' to yore wavin' we'd all be total exhausted. Take th' mail to th' house an' then hone my razor. I thought you was *never* comin' back."

"If you'd seen me drop that crawlin' greaser," began Slim, and then he sputtered. The shaving brush rebounded and fell on the foreman's knee. "Bl-u-u-gh!" said Slim, spitting lather. "You can hone yore razor yoreself!" he snorted. "Here, Matt," he said, offering a letter. "Don't you reckon we should 'a' gone with Baldy? You never can tell what a jury'll do."

"I'm bettin' on what *that* jury will do," said Black Dan, taking the brush.

"Baldy wouldn't 'a' gone back unless he knowed what he was doin'," said Matt, turning the letter over in his hand. "His brother told me it wouldn't get to no jury. He said th' judge would throw it out, an' walk all over th' indictment. When a man's own brother comes for him I reckon he ain't takin' no chances."

Slim swung back into the saddle and rode toward the ranchhouse, waving at the Chinese cook, who grinned but did not reply.

Mat turned the letter over and over, pondering. Black Dan's head again emerged and he made a valuable suggestion.

"Open it," he said, grinning. "Most generally it's on th' inside."

Matt obeyed and drew out a folded piece of wrapping paper, which enclosed a folded piece of white paper. He scowled as he struggled with the pencilled words of the former, his lips moving as he read it.

Dere skinner: this was in some stuff we got at the bank tear it up and look wise one good turn deserves another enuf said Bud skinner

Matt let his pipe go out as he read the enclosure, and then read them both again, staring at them in strained concentration. The second paper was businesslike.

One year from date I promise to pay to the order of the Los Altos Bank, at Los Altos, Territory of New Mexico, the sum of Seven Thousand and no-100 dollars, with interest at ten per centum per annum. Value received.

RANDALL GLENN.

"What's she say?" asked Black Dan, whose eyes were beginning to feel the strain caused by the angle of vision.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" said Matt.

"That all?" inquired Dan. "She *ain't* very lovin', is she?"

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" repeated Matt. He leaped from the bench as if he had been stung and ran to the ranchhouse, in his excitement forgetting to rope, saddle, and mount a horse for the covering of that hundred yards. He covered it on foot, against all the tenets of his calling.

Agnes answered his knock and smiled at him.

"Come in, Matt," she invited. "Somethin' wrong?"

Her swift look of anxiety in no way had anything to do with the ranch, but was purely personal. Despite the shrewd headwork which had cleared up the mysteries surrounding the ranch and resulted in the total extinction of a strong rustler organization and the recovery of a large and valuable herd, the new foreman was unaccountably dense in some things. He was more than dense; he actually was dumb.

Matt handed her the envelope and followed her into the sitting room, where Randall Glenn was placing a bottle and a box of cigars on the table.

"Hello, Matt," said the ranchman, pushing bottle and glass toward the foreman. "Something up?"

Matt grunted and stared at the papers in Agnes' hand. She looked up from them and exclaimed softly, handing them to her uncle and then staring at Matt.

"Well!" said the ranchman in surprise. His gaze settled on the foreman, inquiringly.

"I turned him loose to rob that bank," explained Matt, unblushingly.

"Have a cigar," replied Glenn, calmly. "How did you ever come to do that?"

Matt explained briefly, his eyes on Agnes.

Glenn stroked the note thoughtfully and placed it on the table, weighting it down with an end of the cigar box.

"This is most remarkable, Matt," he said. "It falls due to-morrow." His face hardened, and his lips tightened into a thin line. "Due to-morrow; and I can't meet it."

"Can't you borrow enough from friends?" asked Matt.

Glenn shook his head. "They've closed every source against me. I can't even sell my cattle in time, or get a third of what they are worth. The bank has seen to that. Those that are willing to run foul of the bank haven't enough, between them, to help me." He shook his head and took up the note. "Tell Slim he'll have to go to town again with this. I'll send them a letter explaining how it came into my hands." He looked at his foreman. "It won't be necessary to mention your name."

Tears sprang into Agnes' eyes, but her expression was one of pride. Matt wriggled to the edge of the chair, his expression one of respect.

"I like th' way you do business," he said. "I'm aimin' to stay here as long as you'll have me."

"That'll be as long as I have the ranch, Matt," replied the owner. "That won't be long, I'm afraid." He snapped a finger against the note. "I'll have to go off and begin all over again."

"Sometimes a thing'll pop up at th' very last minute," said Matt. "Will you let me ride in to the bank with you to-morrow?"

"I'd like nothing better," replied Glenn, smiling. "A friend at a man's side is always welcome." He looked around at his niece. "Agnes and Milt are going down to Gravel Flat, early in the morning, to take the train north. They're going home."

Matt stiffened and could not tear his eyes from the quiet, wistful woman on the other side of the table. He moistened his lips and swallowed hard.

"Just when he needs me the most, he's sending me

away!" she protested. "He's given us a home and shared his prosperity with us. Now that *this* has come up, he thinks I'm not big enough to stay with him and help him through it. It isn't fair!" She turned away, her face against an arm, and cried softly.

Matt's heart was going like a trip-hammer, his own eyes moist.

"Don't you worry, Miss Agnes," he said. "This ranch ain't goin' to stop, an' it ain't goin' to change owners, neither! We got till to-morrow noon, ain't we?" He stared into his hands. "You go visit yore folks awhile. From what you've told me they'll be plumb tickled to see you an' Milt. A mother has got *some* rights."

She shook her head miserably.

"But you don't understand, Matt!" she sobbed.

"I understand enough," he replied, doggedly. "There's been a hard fight goin' on up there, an' you'll mebby make it a lot easier. I got a hull lot of respect for yore mother, an' I'm aimin' to send her a little present. I had a mother, too." He was feeling of a seal ring in his pocket. "Can I see you alone before you go, Miss Agnes?" he asked, anxiously.

"Y-e-e-s, Matt," she whispered, dabbing at her eyes and not daring to look around.

Randall Glenn was watching his foreman, watching him closely, torn between friendship and duty. The duty won, and he was about to take part in the conversation when Matt's next words checked him, and saved him from performing a disagreeable task.

"I want to talk to you a little, Miss Agnes," mumbled

the foreman, his fingers closing and opening. "It ain't goin' to be about what I'd really like to speak of, because as things are that's somethin' I ain't got no right to say. It's just a couple of secrets about folks we know, to take north with you, an' make things a lot pleasanter for you. Nobody down here knows who I am; but when you come back ag'in that'll all be cleared up."

Glenn arose, his hand outstretched, and gripped the hand that met his own. He patted his niece's head and strode from the room, to give the cook hell because John Paul Jones had not lived at a time to help Simms on the *Alabama* destroy Union commerce. He closed the door gently behind him and tip-toed across the gallery. The cook was peeling potatoes and considering the many and manifest virtues of his sainted ancestors. He looked up and bobbed his head as his employer stopped beside him.

"Him new foreman dlamn fine fella," said the cook, brightly. "Me no likee Chet worth tlinker's dlamn."

"You're right," said Glenn, gruffly. "You don't get exercise enough at all. Take a walk."

The cook protested shrilly, pointing to the pan of potatoes, but Glenn took him by an ear and led him gently but firmly from the house.

"When I said you don't get exercise enough I wasn't referring to your ears," said his employer. "I meant your legs! Come along with me."

With the closing of the door behind Randall Glenn the silence of the room remained unbroken for moments,

Agnes was looking out of the window, wondering if her eyes were horribly red and swollen. She took small stock in her companion's ability to keep off any subject that she wished him to discuss. Matt seemingly had found an intricate puzzle in the horny palms of his hands, and examined them with great intentness. The ticking of the clock beat ceaselessly upon his consciousness like the strokes of a hammer. At the sound of a slight movement near the window he drew up to the table, took pencil and paper and worked hurriedly, laboriously. Agnes sat stiffly through the ordeal, wondering what he was doing. The clock ticked on, loudly, insistently, reminding her that time was flying.

The first of the pictures Matt had mailed to Griggs' Valley from different towns all had been alike: a gibbet with a dangling rope. Lately, however, they had changed a little. The first of the newer designs had lost the dangling noose; the next had the upright extended beyond the jutting arm. Now there was a further change. He added an arm to the left side, opposite the other. It formed a cross, and under it he carefully printed a message, signed "J. H.", which read:

This is the last. You have redeemed yourself. I have forgotten everything.

Agnes turned hesitatingly as her companion, holding out the letter, went toward her. She took it mechanically, and as her hand closed on it, his hand closed on hers.

"I'm dumb until after yore mother gives yore father

this letter," he said, but his eyes were not dumb. "You don't know me—what I might 'a' done. I don't know how you'll take it, but I can't talk like I want to till you know all th' cards. I'm stayin' here with yore uncle till th' ranch changes owners. That means a long time, because it ain't goin' to change owners for years an' years. Th' money is waitin' to pay that note, but he don't know it, an' he won't know it till to-morrow noon. He ain't goin' to have no chance to get too proud to let a puncher help him. An'," he said, slipping a heavy seal ring on the third finger of her right hand, where it hung loosely, "you give this to yore mother, along with that note. It'll explain everythin'." He stepped back, dropped her hand, and strode hurriedly to the door, through it and on to the bunkhouse, almost running the last score of yards.

Slim was in the middle of Chopin's 'Funeral March,' his favourite air when he was feeling good. The foreman stopped in the door, bent down swiftly and straightened, his arm snapping forward, Reb's boot leaving it. The mouth organ left Slim's cupped hands and glanced off the wall with a tinkling protest.

"What th' hell?" said Slim, leaping to his feet, his hands still cupped.

"That's enough of *that!*" snapped Matt, reaching for the other boot. "Go off on th' range som'ers when you want to bury yore dead!"

"Which same I endorses," chirped Black Dan, honing diligently.

"Aw! You coyotes ain't got no ear fer music a-tall!" protested Slim, coming perilously near the truth.

"Thank God!" said Black Dan, trying a hair on the wire edge, and trying in vain.

"Neither has Glenn," retorted Matt, dropping the boot and leaning against the wall. "He's bustin' yore concert, anyhow. Wants you to saddle up right away an' take a letter to town."

"Ain't I just come from there?" asked Slim, sullenly.

"It'll give you another chance to wave at us," grunted Black Dan. "What'n hell *is* th' matter with this razor? Take a look at it, Matt."

"Look at it yoreself," growled the foreman, going out to saddle Pete for a long ride eastward, where a grassy patch of skyline mocked the eyes of careless riders on the line-house trail.

"Judas Priest!" snorted Black Dan, glaring. "This is gettin' to be a hell of a pleasant outfit! G'wan, Slim; get outa here! I like my own company best!"

"You never did have no sense!" retorted Slim, obeying.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WRONG HAND

THE president of the Los Altos Bank sat bowed before his desk in the rear of the building, mourning less for the disgrace brought on his name than for the disgrace brought on his son and for the loss of that son. He had aged during the last few days and was beginning to realize that he was alone in the world. His thoughts took him back in the years and brought tender scenes before him to haunt and to torture. He had felt that the world had come to an end when his wife had died, but now he was thankful that she had not lived to taste this brimming cup of bitterness. The sounds in the street, the noise made by the two clerks were not heard. The clock on the wall ticked on and on and then clamorously struck eleven. He came to himself with a start and let his hand touch the note on the desk. For the first time in his business career he found himself in hopeless indecision, coldly urged to have his revenge, and swayed from it persistently. They had taken his son from him and should have no mercy; mercy was so fitting in this case, so necessary to mitigate that son's shame the little it could. The half hour struck and he pushed back, calling the senior clerk.

"Demand payment, Walters," the president said,

handing him the note. "I'm not well, and may not be down to-morrow." He walked unsteadily to the door and through it to the street.

At five minutes to twelve two men dismounted before the building and slowly entered. The elder took off his hat to smooth his silvered hair and carefully replaced it. The younger, a gun-wearing puncher who had become famous almost in a day, looked coldly through the wicket and into the clerk's eyes. He indicated his companion.

"Mr. Glenn an' I have come in to see about renewin' that note," he said in a low, level voice.

"I have orders not to renew it, Mr. Glenn," replied the clerk, his eyes on the gray-haired man. He glanced at the clock. "It must be paid before the hour strikes. Sorry to inconvenience you, but money is tight and we are in need of ready funds."

"Here's some that's loose an' ready," said the gun-wearer, bringing his hand from a coat pocket and pushing it through the wicket. It went back again, leaving a bundle of soiled bills on the counter. "Count it, an' give us that note, cancelled, with a receipt in full."

The clerk seemed fascinated by the sudden wealth before him, but counted it mechanically, and then again. He nodded, took the note from a drawer, removed a memorandum from it, wrote carefully across it, and pushed it through the window.

"Good day, sir," he said, turning back to a ledger.

"I said a receipt in full," remarked the gun-wearer, stepping back a pace.

"That isn't necessary. The note was held for a loan.

The loan has been paid, the note cancelled and surrendered. Good day."

"It wasn't necessary in any bank I was ever in before," said the gun-wearer, still speaking softly. "This bank is different. I'm askin' for a receipt. If I don't get it damned quick I'm comin' in to visit you!"

The clerk looked up, studied the glinting eyes for a moment, and reached for his pen once more. As the clock struck he pushed the receipt through the wicket and again turned to the ledger.

Matt Skinner read the strip of paper and passed it to his companion.

"You never can tell about coyotes," he said, swinging on his heel and striding to the door. "Come on, Glenn; this place stinks!"

Randall Glenn was still in a daze, doubting his senses. He had come in to swallow a bitter pill, heard the cold order to swallow it, and then he had seen the note paid, cancelled, returned, and a receipt added for good measure. He followed the tall gun-wearer out to the horses and stared at him.

"Where—where did you get that money, Matt?" he asked slowly, fearing the answer. Bud Skinner had stolen and sent him the note. Almost anything could be possible.

"Yore brother William bought my ranch, up in Griggs' Valley, an' paid me eight thousan' dollars for it," answered Matt, smiling. "That was most of it in there."

Randall Glenn was thinking quickly, surprised as he was. Many things, several letters among them, came

to his mind. He looked closely at his new foreman, groping for the right words.

"My name's Jed Hollister," said Matt, chuckling. "Reckon you've heard of it. Milt, himself, named me Skinner, which is a name which only should belong to bankers an' cattle thieves around *this* town. That note was all that Bud sent me."

"Matt," said the owner of the Hundred Eleven, smiling at how easily the old name came to his tongue, "us Glenns owed you plenty before; what we owe you now never can be repaid. But," he said, hesitating, "what are you going to do about that robbery and killing up in Griggs' Valley?"

"If yore brother has shore changed over, that'll take care of itself," answered Matt. "If he ain't, then I'm payin' for that a lot more than I could pay if I was guilty of it. Will you take my word for it, till we learn more?"

"There's nothing I won't take your word for, Matt," said his companion, holding out his hand. "I don't know who did it, but I'm certain you didn't. Come with me; there's a lawyer down the street that's a good man on partnerships—unless you'd rather take my note."

"Aw, shucks!" expostulated Matt, clearing his throat. "I won't take no partnership for *that!* That's only a loan till prices pick up, an' you can meet it without squeezin' out yore blood."

"Have you faith enough in the ranch to want a partnership and to remain its foreman?"

"'Tain't no question of faith. I can be th' foreman

an' make it pay big without buyin' in when you feel like you can't help yoreself. I ain't even askin' you for no note. A man like you is allus better'n his paper. Come on, or that lazy outfit will be loafin' all day!"

"Matt, I've been wondering what you said to Agnes the day before she left," said Glenn, smiling.

"It's a long story, th' hull of it," answered Matt. "We won't tell it till we can tell it all. There's some another man's got to tell. Come on."

Glenn's narrowed lids opened wide and he took his foreman by the arm.

"There's been enough written between the lines in those letters from Griggs' Valley to let me guess enough of it. Come along to that lawyer!"

The summer passed as summers do. Autumn gave full rein to its artistry on plain and mountain. The mornings and evenings became shrewdly chill and none of the outfit cursed the sun, even at noon. Baldy had just returned, a free man after his trial. He ruined the edge of his razor three times in ten days and had to humble himself to the still-swaggering Slim, who delighted to tell how he, single-handed, had saved a no-account outfit from a flank attack in a little ravine in Rustlers' Valley. Times had changed things so much that he often was allowed to hold his funerals in the bunkhouse. The fall round-up was over and the creaking chuck-wagon, so enthusiastically and persistently cursed by the bunkhouse cook during his most-hated ordeal, acquired rust from the increasing rains. Hay was cut and stacked against a possible norther and the

frozen crust of the winter's snow. Cord-wood hid the ends of the two cookhouses, and a heartening tally-sheet gladdened the Hundred Eleven.

Randall Glenn met the belated mail carrier and took the bundle of letters to the house with him, and comfortably seated himself in his easy chair. An official-looking envelope was selected first, and he smiled over its terse statement that the new brand of the Hundred Eleven had been duly registered. The ranch was now the Window Sash, with a brand not so easily altered, and one taking care of the blotting done in Rustlers' Valley. He took up another, postmarked Griggs' Valley, and wrinkles of delight and surprise transformed his face as he read. He finished the enclosure, a certified copy of the minutes of a jury verdict, and leaned back thoughtfully. Well, no matter how it had been done, it was true. A man had been made over, and another freed of unjust accusation. He looked at a calendar on the wall and counted off the dates. They had been wise to give the letter a two-days' start.

The cardplayers sat back as the door opened and their employer entered the bunkhouse. He groped through the fog of smoke, coughing a little, and gave the official-looking letter to the foreman.

"It's the Window Sash from now on," he told the curious group, and then caught Matt's eyes as the foreman looked up from the letter. "Want you to go to town to-morrow mornin', Matt, and talk over that matter with Houghton. He hasn't got our side of it at all. We leased that range on certain conditions, and they

are not being lived up to. I'll give you a letter to him, and trust you to back it up." He smiled at the cheerful outfit. "Baldy, I thought you wanted to take Matt and go down to stir up Grant County?"

"Aw, shucks," grunted the two-gun man, grinning. "There ain't *nobody* can stir up that county no more. It's so tame it's sickenin'."

"I betcha," said Reb, thoughtlessly caressing a scar that parted his hair almost down the middle, to his great disgust. The maker of that part might just as easily have put it on one side. "Any place Baldy visits is likely to get tame. Lookit this country!"

Slim writhed on his box.

"Huh! If it wasn't for me, holdin' 'em back in th' can——"

Glenn dodged the concerted movement centring on the swearing Slim, and slipped out of the house, laughing immoderately for a man who should have become accustomed to such an outfit after all this time. It seemed as if something else might be back of his mirth. Something else must have been behind it, because he hardly had seated himself in his easy chair before Baldy waddled into the room, an inquiring look on his face.

"You motioned for me to foller you, didn't you?" asked the two-gun man.

"Yes," said Glenn, and laughed again. "Sit down and listen, and don't say a word to anybody about it."

After a pleasant talk, during which he imbibed quite enough good liquor and inhaled part of a good cigar, Baldy arose with a huge grin wreathing his homely face.

"I been worryin' about that," he confessed. "I'll play my hand without a slip." He laughed with his employer, sucked thoughtfully on the cigar, and went out into the night, where he danced queer steps on his way to the bunkhouse.

Early next morning Matt passed the corral on his way to town, there to be detained a great deal longer than he in the least expected. Baldy, peering through the grime of the bunkhouse window, watched his foreman until it was safe to venture forth, and when he did go forth it was to be met by a grinning outfit, who already had hitched a pair of nervous horses to the buckboard and tied the lead ropes of three saddled animals to the rear axle. Baldy climbed into the seat, flourished the whip, and drove past the ranchhouse, where Randall Glenn and a grinning Chinese cook waved at him and wished him Godspeed.

Matt was growing vexed and restless. Houghton had read Glenn's letter, shoved it into his pocket, and started a long-winded discussion of a matter which could have been settled in five minutes. The lawyer was surprisingly verbose for a man of his reputation, and he declared that he would not take the responsibility on himself. He demanded that they confer with others, and confer they did. The morning passed and noon found them still at it. Boulton suggested an adjournment until they had enjoyed a lunch, and they all went to the restaurant, where a poor meal was dragged out until Matt squirmed. It was mid-afternoon when Houghton came to himself with a snap. His words were crisp and few. In three brief sentences he dis-

posed of the whole question, as he could have disposed of it ten minutes after Matt had met him. Boulton smiled at the happy outcome and decided to ride to the ranch with the foreman, pleading that he had not seen his friend Johnny-Reb since two days before. As he rode along and listened to the sheriff's rambling talk Matt wondered if the peace officer had drunk too much, or if old age was stealing swiftly upon him.

They passed the corral and the bunkhouse and Matt stared at the happy idiots seated on the bench. They were all dressed up, as if they were going to a dance. Boulton exchanged some asinine remarks with the grinning bunch and urged his companion to the ranch-house, where even the Chinese cook had put on a heathen shirt, very full and very new.

Matt dismounted and waited for the sheriff to join him.

"Near a whole day wasted to thrash out somethin' we could 'a' settled in a jiffy," he growled. "What's th' matter with Houghton, anyhow?"

"Reckon he was lonesome," grunted Boulton, looking aside.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" snorted Matt.

They walked in without knocking and Glenn barked a question before they had taken a step from the door.

"Where have you been all day, Matt?" he demanded.

"I been ridin' herd on a wind-storm with a lot of damn fools——" he stopped in the sitting-room door, stunned. Smiling faces were turned to him, a whole ring of them. Mrs. William Glenn's was tender, wistful, and beaming with gratitude; William Glenn, leaner

and harder, with a man's expression on his keen face, arose and held out a hand far from pudgy.

Matt took it mechanically, his eyes flashing from the browned face to one that had been in his thoughts day and night for weary weeks. He choked when he caught the soft glow of gold from a heavy seal ring hanging loosely on that third finger, the third finger of the right hand. His vision grew blurred and his throat hurt him.

"Jed Hollister," said a motherly voice from the side of the once-hated boss of Griggs' Valley, "you ain't changed a bit!"

"Yes, ma'am," gulped Matt, "How'd'do, Glenn?" he said, still shaking the pumping hand. "I'm a heap —a heap surprised," he muttered. "I—I——"

"Also yo're talkin' like a sage-hen; buck up, Matt," chuckled Baldy, ungracefully draped on a chair back. "Buck up, Ol' Timer! Don't you pull leather for no tenderfeet!"

"Shut up, you chump!" snapped Matt, coming to himself. He looked around again and took the paper William Glenn shoved into his hand. He read it slowly, and slowly its import sank into his mind. It was a certified copy of the minutes of a jury verdict of the District Court, of Griggs' Valley, and it gave him back his name, clean and unsmirched. He stared at it, not fully conscious of the gentle movements going on around him, the soft steps going toward the doors.

Rubbing a hand across his forehead he put the paper on the table and glanced about. Save for Agnes and himself the room was empty. He blinked, and then

smiled into the wistful face on the other side of the table, and the warm glow of the seal ring caught his eyes.

"Agnes," he whispered, stepping slowly around the table, his gaze suffocating her. "Agnes, I've been hopin', all these weeks, that I put that ring on the right finger, but th'—th'——" He stopped.

"The wrong hand?" she asked in a voice barely audible. "You *did*, Matt, dear!" and she gave him both hands that the mistake might be rectified and all made right.

THE END

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